RELIGION-AND-SCIENCE DIALOGUE FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by Donald M. Braxton

Five years ago, I was asked to build a Religious Studies program from the ground up. My new home institution, Juniata College, had never before housed a program for the academic study of religion. Having myself been reared in a department of religion at Wittenberg University and the University of Chicago Divinity School in the 1980s, I had watched my field transform in the last twenty years. Of particular interest to me was how strongly in ascendancy was the scientific paradigm and how quickly the impact of the hermeneutical and postmodern turns of my own educational formation had declined. Certainly, the secular sciences that focus on religion were chastened by the various forms of cultural criticism that this period generated, but by the late 1990s it was clear that its chief impact was to motivate the scientific study of religion to more rigorously screen itself for its own biases. One important bias of which it became aware was just how Christian the supposed neutral analytical tools of earlier generations were, even to the point that we began to lose confidence that we could adequately define what makes religion distinctively religious.

These days Religious Studies is a hybrid organism in a painful process of transition. Ideally, it aspires to the scientific paradigm with complete neutrality toward such questions as the ontological status of the claims of the religions or whether they are morally useful or harmful. Its closest ally is anthropology rather than theology or the philosophy of religion. In practice, however, Religious Studies still houses aspects of earlier paradigms that underscore the scholar's "duty" of appreciation for and participation in the positive role of religion in human life and its putative need to "construct meaning." For such understandings religion isn't primarily significant simply because of its very evident cultural distribution across all human societies but because it somehow performs a task without which no human being can ultimately be fulfilled.

Donald M. Braxton is J. Omar Good Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Juniata College, 1700 Moore Street, Huntingdon, PA 16652; e-mail braxton@juniata.edu.

[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 2 (June 2007)]
 ISSN 0591-2385

As a scholar of religion, I am clearly a pluralist when it comes to the study of religion, and certainly when it comes to the more specific study of religion-and-science dialogue. Without doubt it is to our benefit that theologians continue to wrestle with the internal coherency of the ideologies of their various religious traditions. Similarly, it is very helpful that philosophers continue to derive public intellectual arguments from religious belief and behavior. Religion is such a complex phenomenon that it must be analyzed at multiple levels of functionality. In the twenty-first century, religion appears more a cultural soup with many ingredients than an essentialist's ontological unity. As this pluralism is affirmed, however, I believe we fail as scholars of religion in the Religious Studies sense when we mistake theological constructions for scientific instruments. Thus, to my mind, understandings are enriched to the extent that the world possesses theology programs in service to the various churches that sponsor them, but, from a strictly Religious Studies point of view, theology and theologians are data for investigation rather than proper scientists in the field of Religious Studies. As Donald Wiebe (1999), forceful critic of the discipline, frequently points out, this concern for programmatic integrity also holds for analysts of religion who mistake their advocacy for this or that feature of "generic" religion or spirituality studies for scientific claims.

So, what can Religious Studies contribute to the religion-science dialogue, given its distinctive mandate? It can contribute various skills, but at the same time there are many things it cannot do. First, I would underscore the relatively small number of scholars trained in the social sciences who focus on the religion-science dialogue. Whatever else the domains of religion and science are, they are certainly cultural systems with distinct traditions of ideological codification and transmission. These cultural resources make certain kinds of practices possible but hide other kinds of practices. Religious Studies is centered in the social sciences and is therefore well situated to bring light to these culturally mediated differences employing its critical sociological, psychological, and cultural tools of analysis. Examples include the extent to which scientific disciplines engage in various systems of ritual that canalize scientific practices and, from my own field of research, how cognitive biases shape the transmission of religious ideas. I am repeatedly surprised at how resistant both scientists and religionists are to these notions. The repertoire of tools the social scientist brings to the study of religion can apply to science as well. Ritualized behaviors, investigative intuitions, and distinctive emotional tonalities such as awe, curiosity, wonder, and reverence are systematically underplayed or reascribed to nonscientific domains in a manner that distorts the picture we have of scientific culture. Similarly, religious practitioners often are recalcitrant inhabitants of "webs of meaning" discourse to the exclusion of scientific explorations of the mechanisms of religious belief formation and practice. When I suggest that Christian theology takes the form it does

because of various cognitive devices operant in all human minds, I am very likely to encounter protective fences erected on charges of reductionism and scientism. To the extent that representatives of religions and representatives of the natural sciences may not be especially well attuned to the methodologies and insights of the social sciences, this is understandable—and regrettable, because they may not be aware of how the tools of the sociology of knowledge and anthropology might illumine the successes and failures of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Second, religion-and-science dialogue has been largely dominated by the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, on the one hand, and theology and philosophy of religion, on the other. One consequence of this structuring is that it reduces the dialogue to what is often a two-way highway metaphor. This analogy clearly limits the range of positions one might adopt in the exchange, as we see in Ian Barbour's widely employed typology, which consists of a fourfold map exploring various combinations of a dyad. I think we can insist on a third topos in the information exchange, and that is the social sciences.

One way to think about it is to envision an analogical toll booth along the information highway linking religion and science. The social scientist serves as the mediating structure between the field that investigates nature and the field that interprets religious experiences. Without attentiveness to social location, the dialogue constantly tries to make the often unsuccessful intellectual leap across very diverse discourses. Social sciences may provide better understandings of the translation matrix through which better dialogue can occur. Social scientists think about these processes in terms of institutional structures, cultural codes and their transmission through time, and the impact of other social forces such as politics, economics, and technology.

A better analogy is available, however, and I think that we should abandon the two-way-highway image. A triangulation process in social mapping is likely to serve us better. Pick a subject for investigation. Let us for the sake of argument make the topic cosmology. In a trialogue, we take vector readings of the phenomenon employing the distinctive tools of each domain. The natural sciences will be best equipped to handle the physics dimensions of the conversation. The religion representatives will be able to explore hermeneutically the meaning systems that can be spun from the observations of the physicists. The social scientists will be able to illuminate the psychological and sociological dimensions of the cosmological ruminations of the physicists and religionists as well as analyze the forces that motivate, generate, and sustain these social structures and discourses. Surely, the presence of these three dimensions better informs all participants in the exchange. In a sense, this design replicates the division of disciplines into humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Of particular interest to me from the Religious Studies vantage point is what three interrelated disciplinary developments have to contribute to a religion-science dialogue of the future. First, parallel to the ascendancy of the scientific paradigm in Religious Studies has been the explosion of information technology. William and Mary physics professor Hans Christian von Baeyer (2003) suggests that information is the unifying concept that science and the humanities have always sought. These days, information sciences are most likely to be studied under the headings of complexity and chaos theory in both the natural and social sciences, and often these bodies of inquiry overflow into the domains of religion and theology. To the extent that the medium is the message, information technology is well positioned to dramatically reconfigure the religious landscape.

A second novel development is in the expanding field of the cognitive science of religion. Building on the success of cognitive science in investigating the mechanisms of human cognition generally, this field seeks to do the same for distinctively religious cognition. This field is promising precisely because it begins with an assumption of naturalism and thereby gains serious traction on the empirical investigation of the mundane mental tools people employ to generate and transmit religious ideologies.

The third development is evolutionary psychology or, more generally, the evolutionary theory of religion. In contrast to nineteenth-century triumphalist constructs of cultural rankings, the twenty-first century will display growing consensus on the evolutionary narrative of our species without the progressivist agendas of the past. Religion is understood as an evolved aptitude with a very specific history, using very specific brain structures and mental devices, and employed for a variety of adaptive, neutral, and maladaptive reasons.

Better understanding the etiology of religion will inform the shape of the future of religion as well. Perhaps it will polarize religious life, as it seems to have done in the United States, and to a lesser extent the relationship of Islam to the West. Perhaps it will serve as a panhuman creation myth around which a species can rally to combat environmental degradation. Information, cognition, evolution—these three seem to me, at least from where I sit as a Religious Studies scholar, to hold great promise for revolutionizing our understandings of religion and the religion-science dialogue. It is a great time to be in the field.

References

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