

Peter Harrison's Territories of Science and Religion: A Symposium

with Peter C. Kjærgaard, "Why We Should Care about Evolution and Natural History"; Kaspar von Greyerz, "Early Modern Protestant Virtuoso and Scientists: Some Comments"; Nathan J. Ristuccia, "Peter Harrison, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Problem of Pre-Modern Religion"; Michael Fuller, "Into Terra Incognita: Charting beyond Peter Harrison's Territories of Science and Religion"; and Peter Harrison, "The Modern Invention of 'Science-and-Religion': What Follows?"

PETER HARRISON, LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, AND THE PROBLEM OF PRE-MODERN RELIGION

by Nathan J. Ristuccia

Abstract. Peter Harrison's Gifford Lectures demonstrate that the modern concepts of "religion" and "science" do not correspond to any fixed sphere of life in the pre-modern world. Because these terms are incommensurate and ideological, they misconstrue the past. I examine the influence and affinities of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy on Harrison's study in order to argue that Harrison's project approaches Wittgenstein's. Harrison's book is a therapeutic history, untying a knot in scholarly language. I encourage Harrison, however, to clarify how future scholars can progress in their study of phenomena once termed "scientific" or "religious" without succumbing to these same mistakes.

Keywords: Christianity; critical theory of religion; disciplinary borders; genealogy of religion; naturalistic accounts of religion; *philosophia*; pre-modern science; Ludwig Wittgenstein

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

I wish that I could have attended the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh back in 2011. Peter Harrison's speeches must have thrilled. I feel sadder about missing the debate and disagreement over coffee—better yet, beer—afterwards with other attendees. Harrison's talks surely roused a great many quarrels among friends. The best part of a lecture series is also the part least accessible in book form.

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Harrison's revised version of these lectures, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (2015), will have to suffice for unlucky absent ones like me. The book is excellent. In less than 200 pages, Harrison transports his reader from Thales' Miletus six centuries before Christ across the Middle Ages to Victorian Britain, following the footprints of "science," "religion," "philosophy," "belief," and a host of other related Latin and English words. The traditional chronological framework of the history of science endures; its content, though, is new. For, by studying the lineage of contemporary language, Harrison shows that—before modernity—"religion" and "science" are anachronisms. The problem with pre-modern religion is that there was no pre-modern religion: just pre-modern laws, rites, nations, and philosophical schools. But more importantly, "religion" and "science" are mystifications; they smuggle ideology into our discourse (3–4). Harrison writes a two-thousand year history of science designed to prove that two-thousand year histories of science should never be written.

For the sake of full disclosure, I am perhaps the wrong respondent to this book. After all, I am neither a historian of the natural sciences, nor a philosopher thereof. Instead, my interest is the relationship between religion and *Wissenschaft* more generally, especially the relationship between Christianity and that idiosyncratic mixture of universal history, classical philosophy, and geographical ethnography that functioned throughout the medieval period as the closest thing the Latin West knew to social science. Perhaps, though, that makes me the ideal respondent. For as Harrison himself avers, if his book supplies one "entirely new perspective" (xi, 167), it is that natural philosophy was philosophy and that natural history was history. From classical antiquity until the early modern period, Europeans viewed the study of natural phenomena not in terms of discrete intellectual disciplines ("hard sciences" like biology and physics) but rather as one of several techniques for the development of virtues. Our classifications confound us when we employ them as a lens for viewing past humans.

Harrison pronounces his book "the culmination of a number of projects . . . over the past twenty years" (xi). Many chapters reflect this culmination. Chapter three, for instance, reads like a summary of his famed thesis that alterations in biblical exegesis and semiotics inspired the Scientific Revolution (Harrison 1998). Chapter five mirrors his more recent book on the links between the Baconian ideal of progress and the doctrine of the fall of man (Harrison 2007). Nonetheless, *The Territories of Science and Religion* extends his earlier research in new directions.

Because of my own background in medieval intellectual history, I will concentrate my comments on the first half of Harrison's book, focusing on the pre-modern era. Moreover, I will not contest minor points of historical detail where Harrison and I disagree. From my perspective, for instance, Harrison's fifth chapter needlessly downplays the role that ideas of this-worldly progress can and have played in Christian spirituality

(141–43). The faith “once for all delivered to the saints” always contained both reconstructionist and developmentalist branches. The history of progressivist thought in Christian theology is not yet written, but vitalist models attracted more than just nineteenth-century liberals. The church father Vincent of Lérins offered a progressivist theory of dogma, but so did his great opponent Prosper of Aquitaine. Joseph de Maistre, the nineteenth-century Catholic conservative and anti-Baconian, compared healthy ecclesiastical changes to the germination of a seed. A recent book emphasizes how developmental thinking shaped an institution as putatively static as Old Princeton (Gundlach 2013). Nonetheless, a list of quibbles of this sort would distract me from surveying the grand stretch of Harrison’s thesis.

WITTGENSTEIN’S THERAPY

This is a Wittgensteinian book. Both the early and the late work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein shapes Harrison’s argument. Not that Harrison prominently states this debt. After all, Wittgenstein only appears on a few pages in the fourth chapter and epilogue as well as in a handful of endnotes for the second chapter (83, 183–85, 211–12). In fact, I doubt that Harrison would agree with my assessment. But Wittgenstein haunts this book from start to finish.

In his second chapter, for instance, Harrison examines the study of natural phenomena in Greco-Roman antiquity. He stresses a point so obvious that most scholars have ignored it. The Greeks and Romans did not have “science.” They had “natural philosophy.” This difference is not terminological; it mattered, because natural philosophy was a part of philosophy: a larger contemplative praxis. Anyone who has read pre-modern schoolbooks knows this taxonomy. Medieval authors, for example, insist that *philosophia* is tripartite, divided into *naturalis/physica*, *rationalis/logica*, and *moralis/ethica*, usually in that sequence. Yet how many times have I, and no doubt plenty of other professors, taught a class on Aquinas or Bacon or Galileo as if “scientist” and “natural philosopher” were synonyms.

Harrison notes that “ancient philosophy has only the most tenuous connection with the subject matter taught in university departments of philosophy (and particularly those that cleave to the analytic tradition)” (26–27). To the ancients, in contrast, philosophy was therapy for the soul, an art of living, preparation for death, a way of life. Philosophers like Seneca, Epicurus, or Simplicius instructed their followers in techniques of meditation and moral habit formation designed to guide the soul to happiness. Often, such teachers arranged the doctrines and spiritual exercises of philosophy into stages. Step by step, the soul ascended from reflection on the natural world, through mathematics and logic, to virtue, happiness, or the One. Because of this classical context, early Christians like

Origen and Justin Martyr presented their own *askesis* as the truest philosophy. According to twelfth-century monks like Gueric of Igny or Peter of Celle, the cloister, rather than the academy, was the “school of philosophy” (Ferruolo 1985, 77–79).

Harrison links ancient philosophy as a “way of life” to Wittgenstein’s concept of *Lebensformen* (26, 211). Arguably, Wittgenstein employed *Lebensform* to refer to the pattern of activity that renders a certain kind of language usage meaningful. “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations* § 19; Wittgenstein 2009, 11). Famously, Wittgenstein claimed that “if a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it,” because we do not share its *Lebensform* (*Philosophical Investigations* § 327; Wittgenstein 2009, 235). Stoic aphorisms or Christian creeds can only signify within the web of institutions and practices distinctive to Stoicism or Christianity. When a contemporary lecturer expounds an ancient philosophy to a classroom apart from its *Lebensform*, the lecture is nonsense.

The deficiency of contemporary analytic philosophy is a leitmotif in this book; Harrison contends that, due to their narrow conception of their discipline, analyticians misconstrue Plato, natural theology, belief, and the character of religion itself (55–56, 71–72, 106). Classical and medieval philosophy differed from the Anglo-American analytic tradition of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. Instead, Harrison hints that the work of Wittgenstein is a better comparison (211–12). After all, Wittgensteinian philosophy is often called therapeutic. Just as Augustine claimed that love of God and neighbor contained all philosophy (42), Wittgenstein maintained that all his writings were “to the glory of the most high God and that my neighbor might be benefited” (Kerr 2008, 43–45). In his early and late works alike, Wittgenstein taught techniques for eradicating philosophic error by untangling “the logical knots in our language” (183). The strictly-numbered propositions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are the rungs of a ladder which progresses—like medieval philosophy—from metaphysics to logic to ethics; a reader should first climb the ladder and then discard it on reaching understanding at the top (*Tractatus* 6.54; Wittgenstein 1922, 187–89). According to many scholars, the early Wittgenstein was a mystic, seeking to ascend beyond science, math, and logic in order to wonder in silence at what can manifest itself, but never be spoken (for example, Nieli 1987).

Wittgenstein, moreover, influences more than just Harrison’s conception of pre-modern philosophy. As the book’s epilogue reveals, Harrison understands his entire intellectual project on analogy with Wittgenstein’s work (183–85). It is “therapeutic cartography,” to quote a sympathetic review by the philosopher James K. A. Smith (Smith 2015). Put another way, Harrison’s treatise contributes to the philosophy of science—not merely to the history of science—but to the philosophy of science in the

ancient sense of the word. Harrison's detailed genealogy of terms like *scientia* and *religio* is a linguistic technique for resolving present-day quandaries. Harrison supplies a history of science that renders all histories of science nonsensical—at least, if they start before 1600. Once you read this book, you can throw it away like Wittgenstein's ladder.

Throughout his book, Harrison attacks one pernicious knot in our language, what I will designate the “domain metaphor.” By “domain metaphor,” I refer to the tendency of contemporary thinkers, scholarly and popular alike, to speak as if religion and science (as well as similar words like magic and society) describe physical areas or countries. Not all users of the domain metaphor presume that the borders between these areas are fixed. Some admit that boundaries are porous and constantly shifting. But all forms of the domain metaphor assume that these areas have center and periphery, that two core collections of ideas and practices are consistently “religious” and “scientific.” Theorists such as Andrew Dickson White or Richard Dawkins relied on this domain metaphor in order to argue for an eternal war between religion and science (172–73, 179–80). But so do thinkers espousing independence or dialogue between the two: for instance, when Stephen Jay Gould portrayed science and religion as “non-overlapping magisteria” or when Francis Collins acclaimed “harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldview” because “God's domain is the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and languages of science.” (Collins 2006, 6). Religion and science cannot wage war or overlap or be explored, unless first they are imagined as regions.

Language borrowed from his opponents' use of the domain metaphor occurs all over Harrison's book. For instance, he entitled the volume “the territories” of science and religion and speaks throughout of spheres, boundaries, cultural terrain, diplomatic relations, and so forth. At the start of his first chapter, which focuses on how pre-modern Latin authors employed *scientia* and *religio*, Harrison compares his foes to a foolish antiquarian who inspects a sixteenth-century map of the Ottoman Empire, trying to locate the countries of Egypt and Israel (1–3). Egypt and Israel are not the same as the landmass that they cover; they are historically contingent institutions for ordering and understanding that topography. So too, Harrison insists, are religion and science.

In the last two decades, numerous scholars have examined the invention of the modern concept of religion during early modernity (for example, Stroumsa 2010; Nongbri 2013). The critical study of religion is a cottage industry—one that I myself have added to in a small way (Ristuccia 2013). Harrison demonstrates that the invention of religion and the reification of science were interdependent processes, occurring at roughly the same period, though with religion somewhat earlier. Multiple events contributed, but one crucial cause was the work of new philosophers like John Locke,

Francis Bacon, and Robert Boyle who dismissed the physical theories of traditional authorities like Ptolemy and Galen along with their Aristotelian and Neoplatonic basis. They cast away the medieval model of an animate, sign-filled cosmos as a “discarded image,” the title of a famous book by C. S. Lewis to which Harrison alludes (74). Mechanistic objects replaced active subjects. Many of these new philosophers were nominalists. Yet when conversing on religion, these new philosophers remained realists; they popularized the domain metaphor. For the domain metaphor to cohere, science and religion must be “entities that exist outside and independent of individual persons . . . of which doctrines or propositional content are a central component” (119). Concepts such as Christianity, nature, and the scientific method must refer to eternal forms existing in an intelligible world freed from people and history.

To consider one example of this modern realism, Harrison remarks that certain early modern historians, such as Jean Delumeau (Delumeau 1977), contend that the Christianization of Europe only finished during the Reformation Era. This position is sensible if, and only if, Christianity is a fixed system of beliefs to be encapsulated in a catechism and taught propositionally to children (94). Late Christianization is absurd if Christianness denotes participation in church rituals like baptism and communion. Most Europeans performed that form of life already in the Carolingian period. Although Harrison never mentions it, ritual participation is what the Latin word *christianizare* meant during the Middle Ages. *Catechismus*, likewise, referred to the pre-baptismal catechetical process, rather than to a written text. Catechesis had its own disciplinary method: “the teaching of the secret” (*disciplina arcani*) whereby converts learned Christian rites and mysteries through as a series of liturgical stages. And, at the same climactic baptism that a new Christian pledged trust (*credo*) in God, that Christian also renounced the devil. Faith was an action opposite to repudiation and abandonment; it was allegiance sworn through sacrament. “Christianize,” “catechism,” “discipline,” and related words only acquired their current intellectualized senses in early modernity: the period that Delumeau studied. If historians treat a culturally-specific understanding of Christianness as an eternal form, they will unearth a past devoid of Christians.

A similar reification occurs in the work of theorists like Auguste Comte or James Frazer who viewed magic, religion, and science as stages in human development, as Harrison remarks (118, 174). In his magnum opus *The Golden Bough*, for example, Frazer interpreted the Roman cult of the “King of the Wood” as descended from a false belief in the fertility-inducing power of human sacrifice. For Frazer, religion is a fixed entity whose essence is pseudo-scientific hypotheses. Contemporary evolutionary psychologists or cognitive anthropologists often follow Frazer by explaining away sacred practices through their putative ancestry in false science,

mental neuroses, or evolutionary adaptations. Both Harrison and Wittgenstein object to such accounts (for Harrison, 83–84, 116; for Wittgenstein, see, for instance, Clack 1998). Origin stories are always historically tentative, and even when correct they cannot describe how rites are meaningful to those performing them. To cite from my own research, knowing that the Christian holiday of the Rogation Days derives from a fifth-century Roman civic procession is no help in understanding eleventh-century church reformers who killed over disagreements about the Rogation liturgy (Hall and Ristuccia 2013). Origin stories based on ahistorical essences are more pointless still.

In the place of realism and the domain metaphor, Harrison substitutes a Wittgensteinian family resemblance (*Philosophical Investigations* § 65–77; Wittgenstein 2009, 35–41). Admittedly, Harrison never employs the distinctive phrase “family resemblance,” but his language indicates that he intends a version of this theory. According to Harrison, science and religion are not natural kinds, contrary to what practitioners of the cognitive science of religion claim to have discovered. “Science” and “religion” do not label unitary transcultural entities as water does H₂O or calcite does a specific mineral (3–6). Instead, they are “folk taxonomies” clustering together an assortment of natural kinds because of “apparent similarities,” “a remote resemblance,” a perceived “pattern of affinities.” Like a family, the diverse practices, institutions, and ideas now grouped as science and religion display crisscrossed likenesses, but no core element or defining border. Some, but not all, of my relatives may have red hair. Some, but not all, may be short. Some, but not all, may need glasses. No individual is the focus of a family. To me, I seem central to my family, while my cousin John seems periphery and his in-laws through his wife seem not part of the family at all. To my cousin John, though, I am peripheral and his in-laws may be central.

In contrast to the domain metaphor, the great advantage of family resemblance is that Wittgenstein’s model scrutinizes how terms are used. Look and see! Over the last decade, multiple scholars writing on the critical theory of religion have employed family resemblance as a research tool (for instance, Nongbri 2013, 23; Cavanaugh 2009, 19–21). Such scholars refuse to ground religion in ultimate concerns, comprehensive worldviews, evolutionary psychology, or the unutterable experience of the *mysterium tremendum*; the meaning of “religion” is its common use, and its normal use today is “anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity” (Nongbri 2013, 23). Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism share features with Protestant Christianity: for instance, public buildings for annual festivals. Therefore, observers might categorize them all as religions. If an onlooker considered a different characteristic to be central—say reverence for the body and former possessions of famous dead—then Wahhabi Islam, for instance, no longer fits, but Soviet Communism, with its

mausoleum to Vladimir Lenin, may. Even Protestant Christianity may no longer fit in that case.

For a historian, the great problem with family resemblance is that people do not talk consistently. As Harrison evinces, over the last thousand years people have used “religion” and “science” in dozens of different ways, for ideological reasons. In 1912, the psychologist James H. Leuba listed over fifty scholarly definitions of religion. These terms are no less equivocal today. Although they sometimes have established usage in small technical contexts, they lack any in the public forum. Wittgenstein analyzed the way words operate within unitary language games such as greeting, ordering, praying, and hypothesizing. But Harrison’s book proves that science-and-religion discourse is not a unitary language game played according to unchanging, widely accepted rules. The usage of “science” and “religion” has varied and continues to vary so much that these words communicate more about the speaker than they do about the topic of speech.

If a historian plans to investigate cultural phenomena that are sometimes classified as religions—for instance, the papal curia or Passover Haggadah or Taoist inner alchemy—that historian has three choices. (1) Avoid the words “religion,” “religions,” “religious” altogether. About those things that we cannot speak, we must remain silent. (2) Supply a fiat definition at the start, in order to render the concept usable for one specific purpose. Compare the arbitrariness of traditional units of measurement such as 1 pace = 75 cm (*Philosophical Investigations* § 69; Wittgenstein 2009, 37). E. B. Tylor’s maxim that religion is “belief in spiritual things” would work. So would “religion is belief in blue things,” if that denotation helps in research. (3) Begin with an excursus, in the style of the Oxford English Dictionary, on all the possible meanings for “religion” that existed in the time and place under consideration. This method compels all scholars to embrace resemblance and compose miniaturized redactions of Harrison’s own book. In my own research, I prefer the first option. Once I finish a Word document, I can run a find-and-replace in a few minutes. But faced with such unprepossessing choices, I empathize with historians who select option (4): just ignore decades of research on “religion,” pretend the term is neutral and intuitive, and write nonsense.

IN SEARCH OF NATURAL KINDS

If this book is therapy, it identifies the neurosis more than the cure. Harrison’s book is a sword for cutting knots in our past language. As a result, Harrison himself never states how scholarship should move forward from here. Should contemporary universities revive ancient disciplines and again embed physics and meditation in philosophy and paleontology in history? In a partial way, the deep history movement—promulgated

especially by Harvard medievalist Daniel Lord Smail—attempts something similar (Smail 2008). So far, few seem enthused.

When Harrison comes to supplying better categories in his epilogue, he insists that “science and religion are not natural kinds . . . there are no firm criteria for adjudicating what should or should not be included in the concepts” (195). Although some non-natural kinds—for instance, bicycles—may permit sharp identity criteria, science and religion do not. Religion is just “things we have decided to lump together” (196) and thus cannot explain nor be explained nor interact in any way with anything. Notwithstanding this book’s title, is it even sensible to talk of religion and science as mappings of contiguous territory, the way Egypt and Israel are? Harrison presumably hopes for one of two outcomes. Either his foes—theologians, analytical philosophers, evolutionary psychologists, New Atheists, and everyday observers alike—will stop talking about religion or they will replace “crude characterizations” with “more nuance and critical” ones. Silence is allegedly impossible; Harrison states that “the option of dispensing with [the categories of religion and science] is not realistic” (194). So it will have to be replacement.

Here, at the end of his superb volume, Harrison disappoints. An artist can replace a crude drawing of a landscape with a superior one because that artist has seen the landscape itself. If there is nothing to sketch, all drawings are equally inaccurate. Because, by Harrison’s own logic, no criterion can arbitrate what is or is not science and religion, no categorization can be nuanced and none can be crude. Likewise, how can science and religion be “folk taxonomies” (4–5)? Since Harrison emphasizes how animals should “properly be classified,” “folk taxonomy” here is synonymous with “bad taxonomy.” In the contemporary world, we reject folk taxonomies that would classify whales as fish or bats as birds based on their environment and external appearance. We reject these folk taxonomies because we have established more useful taxonomies, arising from superior analysis of internal structures. Religion and science can only be folk taxonomies if some other taxonomy is better. Should we now seek to discover the superior methods of analysis needed to classify rightly? Only theology could provide these methods, for what else can inspect the internal structures of gods, rites, and final causes. Harrison mentions that Karl Barth declared religion to be unbelief (116). Perhaps Barth was right.

Harrison’s “folk taxonomy” analogy also presumes that real specimens exist but that currently naturalists have catalogued these specimens poorly. Bats can be called wrongly birds and rightly mammals, because there were bats before there were humans classifying them; bats are a “natural kind.” But what are the natural kinds for religion or science? Is Christianity a natural kind? Examination splits it up into different branches: Catholic, Protestant, Socinian, Mormon, and so forth. And each of these branches divides again into innumerable dogmas, institutions, and practices. Even

asserting that any given person is a “Christian” is fraught. The individual Christian is not a natural kind. Sectarian identity, like ethnic identity or class identity, is socially constructed and subjectively perceived. Pre-modern evidence allows minimal access to subjective constructs, even if historians sometimes pretend otherwise. In my own field of early medieval history, we have thankfully left the time when historians would declare someone long dead a genuine German based on a mustache or a rune stone or a buried brooch. Yet historians unfortunately still proclaim people pagan or Christian because of a hammer-shaped necklace or the first name of a saint.

Religion has no natural kinds, only cultural kinds. That is to say, human cultural phenomena are never “entities that exist outside and independent of individual persons” (119). Only minds can conceive of culture. Either there is an eternal supernatural mind—or minds—who upholds the universe and has marked out the borders of truth and falsehood, sacred and profane, the scientific and the religious. Or there are just humans and all our categories are arbitrary. I remember a proverb of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius: “either all things spring from one intelligent source and form a single body . . . or there are only atoms, joining and splitting forever, and nothing else. So why feel anxiety?” (Hays 2003, 126).

Throughout his book, Harrison hints that better, perhaps even truer, classifications for “religious” and “scientific” phenomena are possible. Yet he never explains what these superior categories would be. I assume he is not sure. Instead, in his pessimistic epilogue, Harrison compares contemporary scholars—of philosophy, history, and natural science alike—to the monks of the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz in Walter Miller’s science fiction classic, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (185–88). Like the brothers, we toil to extend human knowledge employing the content of disciplines whose theoretical justifications we have forgotten. For instance, we still voice the language of religion and science even as we claim (somewhat disingenuously) to no longer fight the ideological battles that birthed them. Harrison neglects to mention that in Miller’s novel the Leibowitz order never succeeds in restoring the theoretical basis for science. Instead, the monastery is violently subjugated by a new institution—the rising monarchy of Texarkana—with its anti-clerical intellectuals. If contemporary scholars are like the monks of St. Leibowitz, perhaps we do not need curing. Perhaps we need destruction and a fresh start.

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