

Review and Response: Kocku von Stuckrad's Study on The Scientification of Religion

with Leonardo Ambasciano, "(Pseudo)science, Religious Beliefs, and Historiography: Assessing The Scientification of Religion's Method and Theory"; and Kocku von Stuckrad, "The Hybridity of Scientific Knowledge: A Response to Leonardo Ambasciano."

(PSEUDO)SCIENCE, RELIGIOUS BELIEFS,
AND HISTORIOGRAPHY: ASSESSING
THE SCIENTIFICATION OF RELIGION'S METHOD
AND THEORY

by Leonardo Ambasciano

Abstract. In the recent past, attempts to revitalize historico-religious studies have challenged the charismatic appeal of some of the most celebrated scholars of the twentieth century. At the same time, the old and ideological frameworks that characterized the field have been critically analyzed and deconstructed. The disciplinary *status quo*, taken for granted for quite a long time, has been shaken to its foundation, paving the way for new approaches. However, the post-modern tenet of problematizing any authority has also become a convenient shortcut to blur the distinction between scientific signal (i.e., knowledge systematically obtained via rational inquiry) and nonepistemic noise (i.e., pseudoscience). Despite this troublesome feature, some scholars have deployed postmodern and poststructuralist tools to study the genealogy, reception, implementation, and diffusion of cultural representations within the aforementioned academic discipline. The present article briefly reviews one of the most recent and remarkable examples of such scholarship, that is, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (von Stuckrad 2014).

Keywords: historical discourse analysis; historiography; history of religions; postmodernism; poststructuralism; pseudoscience; religious studies; science

In the final remarks of a contribution to a recently edited volume entitled *Translating Antiquity*, Oswyn Murray wrote that "[t]he nineteenth century sought to create a mythology for its own age through the interpretation

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of ancient mythology: ancient myth re-enacted itself as modern myth” (Murray 2010, 127). Murray’s statement, originally aimed at describing the *transferts culturels* that underpinned the reception of German *Religionsgeschichte* in England, can aptly summarize the intended purpose of the latest book by religious studies professor and Western esotericism scholar Kocku von Stuckrad.

Entitled *The Scientification of Religion*, the volume is introduced by an essay dedicated to the theoretical and methodological foundations of historical discourse analysis (this preliminary essay represents a revised version of von Stuckrad 2013). A discourse, as von Stuckrad defines it, is any kind of “communicative structur[e] that organize[s] knowledge in a given community” and which “establishe[s], stabilize[s], and legitimize[s] systems of meaning and provide[s] collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social ensemble” (von Stuckrad 2014, 11). From a historical perspective, thus, the goal is to trace the diachronic, interconnected, and sometimes overlapping, Foucaultian genealogies of “science” and “religion” (i.e., “the societal organization of knowledge” about these two topics, marked by the following change of typeface: SCIENCE and RELIGION, 14)¹ and to identify the transmission of knowledge in institutionalized forms via conjoined cognitive, material, sociopolitical, and normative infrastructures (or “dispositives”), which act as vehicles for the attribution of meaning (11–12). The methodology is centered on a hermeneutical strategy of interpretation achieved through the selection of data that is “most suitable for finding an answer to our question[s]” (16), while the geographic setting is further narrowed down to the German and English “transformation and perpetuation of religious discourses as a result of their entanglement with secular academic discourses” (ix).

The results are elucidated in the two parts that follow. The first one, entitled “Discarded Knowledge and Its New Legitimacy in Secular Discourse” (23–112), is dedicated to what the author considers as delegitimized past strands of knowledge (i.e., astrology, alchemy, pantheistic monism, Theosophy). The section is characterized by a specific focus on the clash between the officially sanctioned, modern scientific knowledge and those aforementioned religious endeavors that “have played a special role in European imagination at least since the [fifteenth] century” (20). It is also maintained that, since astrology, alchemy, and magic “subscribe[d] to rational philosophies of nature [and] formulate[d] theories about nature” (20), they were continuously and alternatively outcompeted and reframed as compatible components of a personally meaningful, scientific *Weltanschauung* (i.e., a spiritually comprehensive worldview).

The second part (“Academics as Religious Pioneers,” 113–77) considers actual instances of modern scholars (among whom Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade) who variously exploited their academic niches to “len[d] scientific authority

to new religious interpretations and religious practices” (21) by merging nineteenth-century academic *modus operandi* and the quest for a spiritual renewal of humankind.

In the “Conclusions” (178–82), readers are invited to abandon explanatory binary constructions like “religion”/“science,” “emic”/“etic,” “East”/“West,” and “science”/“pseudoscience” because the heuristic force of such labels is reputed insufficient to describe complex, fluid, and network-based realities (181). On the other hand, since reality itself is judged by von Stuckrad to be historiographically unattainable, the historian’s task is nevertheless to be “fully accountable for [his/her] construction of historical developments” (181), that is, specifically revealing the diachronic and social entanglements of discursive power structures that legitimize some meaningful narratives while delegitimizing others.

The book offers some impressive accounts regarding the history of ideas between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most remarkable examples are represented by the transformation of some branches of the incipient evolutionary biology into a fringe, quasi-religious, or cryptoreligious cult by some overzealous supporters who misinterpreted and/or distorted Darwin’s ideas (exemplified by Haeckel’s monism), the co-option of astrology by Jungian psychoanalysis after the modern-era demise of the former, and the vicious cycle, or self-reinforcing loop, of scholars whose academic output fed into the creation of modern religious discourses and cult revivals concerning the Great Goddess, (neo)shamanism, and Oriental mysticism (cf., respectively, 56–75; 76–93; 113–77). In particular, the deconstructive approach adopted in the second part challenges vehemently the charismatic appeal of past, world-renowned religious scholars and provides a much needed critical account of the disciplinary *status quo* as one entangled with nonscientific claims and personal idiosyncrasies.

However, *The Scientification of Religion* raises more historiographical and epistemological problems than it may solve. While von Stuckrad himself seems to be aware of the various kinds of epistemological mistakes which plague the academic study of esotericism (158), he nonetheless tends to blur the distinction between contextual cultural frameworks, moral prejudices, past (pseudo)scientific discourses, and the demise of what has been since proved to be heuristically ineffective and discarded through a process of verification/falsification (see, for instance, Pigliucci and Boudry 2013). By doing this, he fails to provide a clear assessment of the book’s historiographical arguments. Falling far short of philosophical thoroughness, the deconstructive part of the volume also forgets Jacques Derrida’s warnings on the limits and the very engines of the dismantling exercise (i.e., justice and democracy; see Derrida 1994, 35; Derrida 1997, 105; Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 56–57; Ferraris 2006, 56), further expanded by New Realism to include the indeconstructible ontological basis of natural sciences

(cf., for instance, Ferraris 2014; on the relationship between naturalistic ontology and the construction of social realities, see Ferraris 2012).

Considering these premises, readers may be somewhat baffled concerning the effective value (if any) of giving up dichotomous labels like “science” and “religion.” Whenever scientific and pseudoscientific explanations collide, von Stuckrad induces the reader to prefer the pseudoscientific ones suggesting an unjust rejection by the scientific milieu (cf. the first part of the volume). Rigorous epistemic criteria are eschewed by confusing the Nobel-winning work of physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900–1958) with his metaphysical and alchemico-psychoanalytical output (52), and the same happens with the presentation of the *locus communis* of quantum spirituality (54–55). An allegedly Kabbalistic imagery behind the metaphor of decoding the genetic code (134), and the misrepresentation of the cognitive science of religion, misleadingly portrayed as something already hinted at by Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) or by Eliade himself (cf., respectively, 83, 73), stand out as peculiarly perplexing from a documentary perspective. As a matter of fact, the cognitive dimension, although explicitly recalled in the opening pages (11), is almost entirely missing. A bizarre apologetic apogee is reached in the following sentence, concerning Russian esotericist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891): although what she wrote might be very easily traced back to other written sources, “[w]e have no reason to doubt that Blavatsky possessed mediumistic powers, which could have played a certain role in the creation of her major works” (98).

Finally, the volume is vexed by an incomplete selection of historiographical and critical documents, which lends itself to cherry-picking and, consequently, to a misplaced contextual assessment of the documents’ value. For instance, discourses about the human genome project and Carlos Castaneda are basically being given the same, utterly misleading, historiographical status (respectively, 134, 167–68).

For better or worse, it should be recognized that this is a book with a strong agenda. Von Stuckrad tries to negotiate a disciplinary identity by accepting the institutional demise of the academic history of religions of old (cf. Wedemeyer 2010, xxv and *ibi*, note 23), while coming to terms with the fact that some of the greatest historians of religions of the past have sensationally failed, and that their ideological commitments have been deconstructed (e.g., Ambasciano 2016, 142–66). Nonetheless, in order to immunize what is left of the historico-religious discipline from further attacks, he is forced to postulate that every academic activity is inherently flawed, questionable, and fallible. Therefore, and more problematically, from von Stuckrad’s perspective every scientific and religious item indifferently shares the same heuristic value, even mediumistic powers and paranormal pseudoscience, regardless of their epistemic warrant. The elaborated rhetorical outcome may resemble at first sight the sardonic “anything goes” *à la* Feyerabend, yet the volume implicitly provides a serious and disconcerting plea

for discrediting and questioning the credibility of science. This partial attitude obfuscates the many interesting suggestions presented in the volume.

As a result, *The Scientification of Religion* is provocatively engaging and genuinely intriguing but, unfortunately, its ambitious social constructivism takes the readers into an epistemic blind alley. I can only hope that, since von Stuckrad's volume is presented as an initial "pilot study" (18), which shows some potential, forthcoming historical discourse analyses will adopt a more vigilant epistemological and historiographical attention, renouncing the mystical and apologetic pattern-seeking approach which has characterized a consistent part of the discussion so far.

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NOTE

1. Unspecified parenthetical referencing is from von Stuckrad (2014).

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