Reeves's Against Methodology in Science and Religion

with Paul Allen, "Critical Realism Redux: A Response to Josh Reeves"; J.B. Stump, "Science and Other Common Nouns: Further Implication of Anti-Essentialism"; Peter N. Jordan, "Legitimacy and the Field of Science and Religion"; Jaime Wright, "Making Space for the Methodological Mosaic: The Future of the Field of Science and Religion"; Victoria Lorrimar, "Science and Religion: Moving beyond the Credibility Strategy"; and Josh Reeves, "Methodology in Science and Religion: A Reply to Critics"

MAKING SPACE FOR THE METHODOLOGICAL MOSAIC: THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD OF SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION

by Jaime Wright

Abstract. This article is a response to Josh Reeves's recent book *Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates on Rationality and Theology* that welcomes Reeves's proposal for an anti-essentialist future for the field of science-and-religion, particularly because it has the potential to move the field beyond current, well-worn methods: the dominance of Christian theology and doctrine, the importance of credibility strategies, and the dependence upon philosophical discourses. Reeves' proposal has the potential to open the science-and-religion field to other topics, problems, and methods, such as studying lived science-and-religion. One way of doing this is to study popular culture and its artifacts such as literature, which portrays a co-mingling of religion and science at the level of day-to-day experiences and practices of characters. For at the level of lived experience, religion and science are not well-defined disciplines neatly compartmentalized into separate academic departments.

Keywords: experience; lived religion; lived science and religion; methodology; popular culture; practice; religion; science; scientific method; theology and science

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When I was first accepted to begin postgraduate studies in science-and-religion, the academic field dedicated to studying the intersection of science and religion, at Edinburgh University, the president of the religiously conservative Bible college from which I was about to graduate

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automatically assumed that I was pursuing a future ministry career in Christian apologetics. Now I cannot say exactly what this individual understood by the term *apologetics*. However, his assumption was not without cause, for even beyond the boundaries of conservative Christianity the science-and-religion field has been dominated by Christian theologians and their concern for the rationality of the Christian faith. Indeed, the projects of Nancey Murphy, Alister McGrath, and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, explored in Josh Reeves's *Against Methodology in Science and Religion*, are each apologetic in nature.

However, I must confess that my research in science-and-religion has not taken the path of Christian apologetics—not even of the rigorous, scientifically informed styles of Murphy, McGrath, and van Huyssteen. Rather, my research has led me to engage religious studies, literary theory, and popular culture—fields of enquiry in which the very definition of *religion* is challenged, let alone the prominence of Christianity. Furthermore, although the disciplines of philosophy of science and philosophy of religion often dominate discourse within the science-and-religion field, there are also historians, anthropologists, and social scientists engaging the intersection of science and religion in culture, in society, and in the lived experiences of individuals.

The above-mentioned experiences thus allow me to consider Reeves's anti-essentialist argument, which implies that there is no single essence by which we can define *science* or *religion*, from two vantage points. On the one hand, anti-essentialism threatens the longstanding project of defending Christian theology with the tools of science. On the other hand, accepting Reeves's anti-essentialist argument allows greater freedom to examine religion and science through other disciplinary lenses, such as history, anthropology, and sociology. I can, therefore, both appreciate the concern that Reeves' anti-essentialist argument poses and revel in the possibility of methodological expansion within the science-and-religion field. Despite such dual awareness, I want to dedicate this response to explicitly celebrating some of the implications of anti-essentialism in the science-and-religion field, if Reeves's thesis is to be accepted.

In the final chapter of *Against Methodology*, Reeves addresses a potentially damning question: "Should there even be a field of 'science and religion' if its core concepts lack any universal validity?" (Reeves 2019, 128). Notice, here, that this is not just a question about methodological debates within the science-and-religion field, but about whether the entire field can or should survive if those methodological debates have been predicated upon the faulty assumption of scientific essentialism. Reeves's answer, to the likely relief of many, is, yes. Reeves suggests three ways forward for the field. First, science-and-religion scholars can become what he calls, *historians of the present*, doing more descriptive work and becoming facilitators for competing groups in science-and-religion dialogue. Second,

science-and-religion scholars can be embedded within specific (usually scientific) research programs, forcing them to focus on specific problems at the intersection of religion and science. Third, methodological debates can continue, but with reformed understandings of the categories *science* and *religion*, acknowledging their non-essentialist nature.

In fact, these directions are already being taken by current scholars in the science-and-religion field. As an example of the reformed methodological debates option, Reeves points readers to one of his own research articles, in which he acknowledges the non-essentialist nature of science by considering the disparate threads of Cartesian and Baconian methods within modern science (Reeves 2013). There are multiple examples of scholars working on specific problems in the science-and-religion field: Reeves mentions the success of the Divine Action Project, and there are other recent research projects, such as that of the University of Edinburgh (2019a, 2019b), requiring researchers to focus on particular scientific and theological issues and collaborate with a scientific laboratory in order to embed researchers within a specific scientific context. Finally, descriptive work is already being carried out by historians, anthropologists, and social scientists. Consider, for example, sociological and anthropological research by Elaine Howard Ecklund (2010; Ecklund and Scheitle 2018) and John H. Evans (2011) and historical research by John Hedley Brooke (2014) and Peter Harrison (2015). I find the growth of all three of these directions for research within the science-and-religion field exciting.

I think my own research (see Wright 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020) has perhaps been most aligned with the idea of science-and-religion scholars becoming "historians of the present." I am particularly interested in science-and-religion as it is engaged within popular literature. Studying the lives of characters has led me to think about what I call *science-and-religion-as-lived* (see Wright 2019)—not only within the lives of fictional characters but also those within our nonfiction, extra-textual world. Science-and-religion-as-lived, or lived science-and-religion, is interested in lived experience—particularly lived experience of religion, science, and their intersection. Because such research is of lived experience, it is focused on what might be considered a bottom-up, descriptionist (anthropological, sociological, psychological) understanding of *science* and *religion* that is often nonessentialist in the way Reeves suggests. My interest in science-and-religion-as-lived developed from my encounter with studies of religion-as-lived. For example, in her book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Meredith B. McGuire (2008) argues for the value of studying "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives" (12). McGuire claims that by examining lived religion "we may get closer to understanding individual religion in

all its complexity and diversity" (McGuire 2008, 16), for "[a]t the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even [logically] coherent. We should expect that all persons' religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing" (McGuire 2008, 12). Within the broad study of religion, McGuire's proposed method is not without scholarly relatives. Consider, for example, studies of those who claim to be spiritual but not religious (see Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014), studies of New Age spiritualities (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005), and some approaches to philosophy of religion (see Harris 2010). Furthermore, it is a method also found within sociology of science (e.g., see Price and McNeill 2013; Abbott and Wilson 2015). Science-and-religion-as-lived has the potential to examine not only what people think, but more significantly how people act in a world in which the scientific and the religious are widespread, if not ubiquitous, at the level of lived experience—especially if technology is included in what we consider to be scientific and spiritualities are included in what we consider to be religious. Our experience of life is heavily influenced by science and technology, and the decline of spirituality expected by the secularization thesis, formed at the turn of the century, has not occurred despite the decline of church attendance and influence.

While I do not think we should abandon top-down, prescriptive (philosophical, theological) explorations of science-and-religion—including those that seek to understand the implications of the intersection of particular scientific theories with particular theological doctrines—I think it is important that the science-and-religion field continues to expand, such that it also explores the bottom-up, descriptive accounts of the lived experiences of, for example, those working in scientific laboratories, those whose lives are intermingled with their smart phone, those worshipping in a temple or undergoing a reiki session, those seeking to align their Christian beliefs and practices with environmental activism, or those participating religiously in an online environment. Not only do *science* and *religion* lack an essential nature, but they also combine in messy ways in people's messy lives.

According to Reeves (2019), this descriptionist model, in which science-and-religion scholars become "historians of the present," envisions science-and-religion scholars "as debate facilitators, using their knowledge of the history of science and religion to improve conversation between competing groups," such that they can "help build bridges of understanding between different communities," rather than between the entities *religion* and *science* (130). However, Reeves considers this model for the future of science-and-religion scholarship to be the least viable for two reasons. First, it limits the scope of science-and-religion discussions, since the descriptionist model avoids the specifics of how to reconcile scientific discoveries with different religious traditions. Second, most current

science-and-religion programs are connected to theological facilities that would not be equipped to train science-and-religion scholars in the descriptionist mode.

My response to these issues is similarly twofold. First, we should be encouraging all three future paths that Reeves has presented. Science-and-religion scholarship only stands to benefit from all three of these models: we need people to continue addressing methodological issues, despite the nonessentialist nature of both *religion* and *science*; we need those—perhaps rare—individuals who are deeply trained in both a scientific and religious discipline to speak to specific issues at the intersection of particular scientific and religious questions; and we need those who can help clearly describe the complexity of the intersection of the scientific and the religious. Therefore, and second, we do not need to have every science-and-religion program equipped to train descriptionist scholars, but we need some. Current journals, conference organizers, and research centers can aid development in this area by being open to the contribution of descriptionist scholars. Further benefit would come from the founding of some journals, conference networks, and research centers specifically for such scholars so that the few of them throughout the world have various means of coming together to share and discuss research. The International Research Network for the Study of Science & Belief in Society (2019) is one such network. Not being currently well equipped is not enough of an excuse to avoid development of this research direction in the field of science-and-religion.

I have entitled my response to Reeves's *Against Methodology*, "making space for the methodological mosaic." I am interacting with Reeves' book as someone who has already deviated from the normative expectations of the science-and-religion field: the heavy emphasis on Christian doctrine and theology; the perceived importance of credibility strategies, especially in the face of scientific or critical realism; and the dependence upon philosophic discourses. Reeves' suggestion of a science-and-religion field broadened to include more problems and methods than defending the rationality of religious (specifically Christian) belief as it relates to the rationality of science reads to me as a welcome invitation to those seeking to conduct science-and-religion research from different and diverse methodological approaches and a variety of topical interests. Although Reeves' critique of scientific essentialism might cause some to question the viability of the science-and-religion field, I agree with Reeves that the field is now established well enough to withstand his anti-essentialist critique. Not only is the intersection of science and religion still a hot topic in our society and of continued interest (and financial support), but ultimately it is us—the current science-and-religion scholars and funders—who are the gatekeepers for the future of our field. Reeves has indeed critiqued one of the primary emphases in this field for the first 50 years of its existence, but in

doing so he has made space for the methodological mosaic of the future, and I think that is something to celebrate.

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