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Duke University, 2016

A Prescription for the Future of Religious Studies

Second-Order Tradition and the Spirit of Modern Science

“Geometry sets out from certain conceptions such as ‘plane,’ ‘point,’ and ‘straight line,’ with which we are able to associate more or less definite ideas, and from certain simple propositions (axioms) which, in virtue of these ideas, we are inclined to accept as ‘true.’ Then, on the basis of a logical process, the justification of which we feel ourselves compelled to admit, all remaining propositions are shown to follow from those axioms, i.e., they are proven. A proposition is then correct (‘true’) when it has been derived in the recognized manner from the axioms. The question of the ‘truth’ of the individual geometrical propositions is thus reduced to one of the ‘truth’ of the axioms. Now it has long been known that the last question is not only unanswerable by the methods of geometry, but that it is in itself entirely without meaning. We cannot ask whether it is true that only one straight line goes through two points. We can only say that Euclidean geometry deals with things called ‘straight lines,’ to each of which is ascribed the property of being uniquely determined by two points situated on it. The concept ‘true’ does not tally with the assertions of pure geometry, because by the word ‘true’ we are eventually in the habit of designating always the correspondence with a ‘real’ object; geometry, however, is not concerned with the relation of the ideas involved in it to objects of experience, but only with the logical connection of these ideas among themselves.”

- Albert Einstein, *Relativity* (1920)

(I) Introduction

Science and religion are both products of the ancient human quest for truth; two epistemological variations on the grand struggle to ascertain ultimate meaning from the observable, palpable circumstances of our mortal existence. The precise character of their connection is intricate, and opinions on its nature vary drastically from those of staunch scientific

atheists such as Bertrand Russell¹ and Richard Dawkins², to steadfast mainstream theologians like William Lane Craig³, to more moderate thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead⁴ who occupy a philosophical middle ground. The truth of the matter is that numerous volumes have been written, many within the last decade,⁵ illuminating the relationship between science and religion, as well as the sundry academic traditions that have sprung from that rich history.

Although there is still much to be discovered at the intersection of reason and faith, that is not an endeavor that this discourse aims to undertake. Indeed, to press the matter any further would require a definition of terms, which would be to engage in a style of scholarship that this work fundamentally opposes. And so, for the moment, it must suffice to say that *any* definitions we might put forth could in fact be shown—through painstaking linguistic deconstruction and historical inquiry—to essentially result in a conclusion that Albert Einstein reached in 1941, just over two decades after the publication of his groundbreaking work, *Relativity*: “Now, even though the realms of religion and science in themselves are clearly marked off from each other,

¹ Russell is a firm believer that science is fundamentally at odds with the church. In an essay titled “An Outline Of Intellectual Rubbish” he writes, “ Throughout the last four hundred years, during which the growth of science had gradually shown men how to acquire knowledge of the ways of nature and mastery over natural forces, the clergy have fought a losing battle against science, in astronomy and geology, in anatomy and physiology, in biology and psychology and sociology,” (*The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, p. 47).

² In his 2004 book, *A Devil’s Chaplain*, Dawkins bitingly writes, “To an honest judge, the alleged convergence between religion and science is a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham,” (p. 151).

³ Craig writes, “the whole scientific enterprise is based on certain assumptions which cannot be proved scientifically, but which *are* guaranteed by the Christian world view; for example: the laws of logic, the orderly nature of the external world, the reliability of our cognitive faculties in knowing the world, and the objectivity of the moral values used in science. I want to emphasize that science could not even exist without these assumptions, and yet these assumptions cannot be proved scientifically. They are philosophical assumptions which, interestingly, are part and parcel of a Christian world view.” The quote is from a post on his website *ReasonableFaith.org*.

⁴ A sentiment representative of Whitehead’s philosophy is found in his work *Science and the Modern World*. Whitehead writes, “Faith in reason is the trust that the ultimate natures of things lie together in a harmony which excludes mere arbitrariness. It is the faith that at the base of things we shall not find mere arbitrary mystery,” (p. 26).

⁵ See, for example, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion* (2009), edited by Ronald L. Numbers.

nevertheless there exist between the two strong reciprocal relationships and dependencies.”⁶ In other words, opinions that make use of extreme and polarizing language to set science and religion in direct opposition, and those that otherwise offer a hierarchy of one over the other, are just that—*opinions*. They are personalized, polemicized conceptions of two sovereign domains of human experience historically in conversation with one another, that have been unjustifiably bent and twisted to reify the delusion that any one person can hold tangibly in her palm some *fundamental truth*. It is in Einstein’s conception of truth—as something that must be qualified and deemed meaningful only in the particular circumstances that produce it—that we find value. And so it is Einstein’s notion of reciprocity between religion and science that provides a valuable motivator for the discussion at hand.

The current study is intended to serve as both commentary on religious studies scholarship and an exercise in applied religious theory. The first objective of this project, then, is to shed light on a severe detriment to the field of religious studies that has resulted in academic stagnation: Largely because of the devaluation of religion by modern science and vice versa, but also because of a collective failure to accurately identify the characteristics comprising a scientific field and incorporate them into religious studies scholarship, there has been virtually no effort to employ a *genuinely scientific approach* to the study of religion.⁷ And with that statement I will have lost the trust of many readers. But I entreat those who are wary of so bold a claim to momentarily resist the instinct for defense and debate (we will see later that such a response is generative of the problem we are addressing). After all, my suggestion is not that

⁶ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions: Based on Mein Weltbild* (New York: Crown, 1954), 46.

⁷ This is not to suggest that scientific work has not been done by scholars who perceive themselves to be part of the field of religious studies. It is only to say that the field as a whole has by and large neglected to participate in a scientific mode of discovery. The text explores this failure in more depth in later sections.

every approach to the study of religion proposed thus far has proven unscientific. As a matter of fact, we will show that the birth of religious studies is rooted firmly in philosophical trends directly inspired by the Scientific Revolution, and that on a microscale Max Müller's efforts to initiate a "science of religion" were quite successful. What I mean to say is only that on a macroscale religious studies lacks something that has left it remarkably stagnant in the same 150-year period that has seen unprecedented advancement in the natural and materials sciences. Therefore, it must be the case that religious studies is deficient in what we will term for the moment *the spirit of modern science*. Precisely what *the spirit of modern science* is, we will have to decide as we move through the following sections. For the time being, we only claim that the field of religious studies is less mature than many disciplines born around the same time, or even later, and that by considering its development as a whole we might begin to uncover a brand of scholarship that would better serve its goals. But, before we have the opportunity to validate this claim, we must continue to outline the contents of this essay holding one assumption: that there is an inherently valuable characteristic of the scientific method⁸ that religious studies has not enjoyed to its advantage, despite numerous attempts by individual scholars to adopt a scientific methodology. Only once we ask ourselves why the scientific method should be considered so valuable will we find that this "assumption" is by no means an unwarranted one and that our frustrations with religious studies force us to consider the question, "what makes a science a science?" And only through *that* line of inquiry will we come to see that its flaws are not in its

⁸ This might appear to the astute reader to be a logical jump. After all, why assume that scientific methodology offers what religious studies lacks? Why not search for that key piece elsewhere within the sciences? To this, we reply that our construal of the term "scientific method" is not strictly limited to refer to the methodological norms of the natural sciences. Instead, we use the term "scientific method" to capture the broader characteristics of scientific scholarship. This essay will later address what those characteristics are, and which of them are missing from religious studies.

methodologies at all, but in its scholars' failure to embody *the spirit of modern science*, which exists largely in parallel with the scientific method of the natural sciences.

And thus we come to the second objective of this study: to prescribe a corrective course for religious studies scholarship in the interest of accelerating its advancement. Why, we ask, have our attempts to treat religion scientifically failed to produce the same forward-moving strides we have seen in chemistry, physics, and biology? And, more importantly, how can we fix it? In 1974, Walter Capps of the University of California, Santa Barbara Department of Religious Studies argued that the field, “has no center. There is no single, identifiable core element. There is no common subject which is treated by all who are associated with departments or programs in religious studies, regardless of the backgrounds out of which they come or the disciplines they represent.”⁹ As a result, even a brief appraisal of the current state of religious studies scholarship will reveal that discourse in the field shies away from scientific collaboration in favor of abstract revision, refinement and refutation of long-standing theories, as well as pointless, interminable debates over methodology.¹⁰ In short, “religious studies has not yet learned to operate with effective awareness of what might be called a second-order scholarly tradition,”¹¹ and as such, “while we live with these absences and vacancies, we give the impression of having to make up the subject anew each time we approach it, as if there were no protocol at all...”¹²

⁹ Walter Capps, “On Religious Studies, in Lieu of an Overview,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 4 (1974), 731.

¹⁰ A search of the ATLA Religion Database returns 1,970 English language results for “religious studies AND methodology” as opposed to only 1,702 for the much broader search criteria of “religious studies AND science”. This, of course is not “proof”, but it certainly speaks to the volume of work performed on the topic of religious studies methodology.

¹¹ Capps, “On Religious Studies, in Lieu of an Overview,” 730.

¹² *Ibid.*, 731.

Nowhere are the repercussions of such immature scholarship more apparent than in the emergence of what Daniel Pals terms “antireductionist” theories of religion, which generally contend that thinkers like Freud, Marx, and Durkheim, “appeal to something subconscious or irrational to explain why [religion] persists,” and that, “such theories rest on a serious misunderstanding.”¹³ Such thinkers, taking issue with theories that adhered to the Darwinian model, suggest as E. E. Evans-Pritchard does that, “We should...realize what was the intention of many of these scholars if we are to understand their theoretical constructions. They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of the same way.”¹⁴ Thus, for some scholars, perhaps most notably Mircea Eliade, the call for a revised approach to religion in the 20th century was best addressed by the rejection of the so-called “reductionist” theories and the adoption of a standalone phenomenological theory, which maintains that, “A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try and grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of...any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.”¹⁵ Undeniably, antireductionist theorists deserve praise for their recognition of flaws and biases in the functional theories of the 19th century. Where they go wrong, however, and where they typify

¹³ Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 340-41.

¹⁴ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 15.

¹⁵ Andrea Sun-Mee Jones, “What the Doing Does: Religious Practice & The Problem of Meaning,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6, no. 1 (2004), 90.

Capps' diagnosis is in their complete abandonment of those existing theories, and with them the customs of the scientific method—the significance of which we will discuss soon.

That problem is addressed, if indirectly, by Andrea Sun-Mee Jones, who importantly points out to contemporary thinkers that, “the language game of reduction has untoward consequences. There is a way in which talk about reductionism...close[s] off possibilities.” Her dissatisfaction with the state of religious studies scholarship led her in a 2004 essay to develop a strategy by which, “The scholar need not adhere to a single interpretation as capturing *the* meaning of a religious practice.”¹⁶ She calls the method “what the doing does” and asserts that taking religious theory not to be a description of what religion fundamentally *is*, but of what its *tangible implications* are, “allows one to partake of a certain theoretical promiscuity.”¹⁷ But Jones' work, effective as it is, stops just short of making the statement that scholars of religious studies need to hear—namely that a rejection of “what the doing does” is a rejection of *the spirit of modern science*, and therefore an affront to a valuable mode of scholarship that we will ultimately observe to be entirely compatible with both functional and phenomenological conceptions of religion. “What the doing does” therefore represents something much more powerful than Jones suggests in her article. It is not simply a statement that what we understand about religious practice depends on perspective, it is a testament to the importance of collaboration—of cumulative knowledge—in a field that craves progress. It is proof that disjunctive theories can simultaneously describe observable truths about religious practices and their impact on our world. And it therefore seems that Jones stops just short of characterizing “what the doing does” as the core element of *the spirit of modern science*. This study,

¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁷ Ibid.

recognizing the importance of Jones' work and connecting it to what we will come to know as the "second-order tradition" that religious studies desperately needs, offers a way forward for religious studies scholarship.

At this point, it will serve us to outline the form that the rest of this essay will take. The first section of this work is an appraisal of religious studies as a whole. Beginning with a brief overview of its history and its inception into the Western academic sphere, we will attempt to describe the unique circumstances under which the impulse to make religion intelligible transformed into what we today call religious studies. As we survey several major milestones in the history of religious studies, we will observe that the relative institutional success of the field is not matched by the success of its intellectual products (rest assured we will consider what makes an academic pursuit successful, and whether that metric is useful for religious studies). Furthermore, we will see that the antagonistic relationship between religion and science to which we alluded at the beginning of this essay may be a significant factor contributing to that failure. Ultimately, we will find value in the writing of theoretical-physicist-turned-historian-of-science Thomas Kuhn, whose noteworthy historiographical approach to the characterization of scientific revolution will provide us with a novel way of expressing the precise shortcoming of religious studies. And in so doing, we will be forced to think somewhat more deeply about the works of Walter Capps and Russell McCutcheon in an attempt to consider what it really means to say that religious studies lacks *the spirit of modern science*. Our hypothesis at the conclusion of the first section will be that in order to infuse *the spirit of modern science* into religious studies, we must find a way to transplant the intellectual values propounded by practitioners of the natural sciences onto the work of religious studies scholars.

The second section addresses two concerns that naturally arise with the assertion of our hypothesis: 1) Why place such importance on the scientific method? What is the method's inherent value, and why should scholars of religious studies look to scientific methodology to supplement scholarship in a field that is not a natural science? 2) Religious studies is not a natural science, and therefore should not be treated as one. Why, then, should scholars of religious studies hope to develop tools comparable to the mathematical laws employed by natural scientists? These questions, by nature, do not have explicit answers, and we can therefore offer only what we consider to be compelling arguments informed by all of the evidence we will have considered up to this point. In order to most powerfully demonstrate the robustness of our hypothesis against the concerns of critics, we will not only address these questions, but we will use them to strengthen and advance the primary argument of our essay.

The third and final section embraces a notion set forth by Andrea Sun-Mee Jones in “What the Doing Does” wherein she, “seeks to conserve useful theoretical resources wherever they are found.”¹⁸ Careful consideration of her proposed methods allows the scholar of religion to circumvent many of the pitfalls that render religious theories ineffectual in application, and the freedom to formulate new ways to bolster the utility of theoretical discourses in addressing questions of the field. This work contends that the scholar of religious studies, by nature of the importance of religion—if not in mainstream scholarship then at least in daily public life in the U.S.—possesses enormous intellectual capital, and that in order to retain it she must learn to employ religious theory effectively. It is therefore of the utmost importance to establish an academic tradition that, “extricates one from the business of determining which interpretations of

¹⁸ Ibid.

religious practice are ‘really real,’” in favor of pursuing, “studies that investigate more pointedly the great human concerns that redound in special ways to each generation.”¹⁹ In order to extend Jones’ work to that end, we will inspect “what the doing does” through a Kuhnian lens and show that Jones is, in fact, calling for an embrace of *the spirit of modern science*.

(II) What’s Wrong with Religious Studies?

Interpreting the Issue

The description of this section presented in the Introduction was designed to be somewhat misleading—and with good reason. We claimed there that our goal would be to briefly outline the history of religious studies and its inception into the sphere of Western academia so that we might begin to understand the intellectual stagnancy that characterizes the discipline as a whole. But, as Walter Capps points out in *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, “it would be impossible, in either brief or long scope, to reproduce the entire history of the academic study of religion, even restricting the subject to the narratives that can be traced through Western intellectual history.”²⁰ And in that assessment we encounter a crucial paradox: how can we call a field stagnant that has produced so extensive an intellectual oeuvre as to preclude even a cursory retelling of its short history from the realm of possibility?

¹⁹ Robert Wuthnow, “Is There a Place for ‘Scientific’ Studies of Religion, *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review* 49, no. 20 (2003), B10.

²⁰ Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) p. xviii.

A compelling answer to that question is contingent on our understanding of a concept that Capps calls an academic field's "second-order tradition," by which, "we refer to a coordinated account of the primary schools of interpretation, methods of approach, traditions of scholarship, and, most significantly, a shared living memory of the ways in which all of these constitutive factors are related to each other."²¹ According to his scholarship, *all* mature fields of study (he tellingly uses the relatively new discipline of sociology as a successful example) have a common claim to some unique and coherent second-order tradition that allows its scholars to conduct inquiry constructively. "Those working within the field," he claims, "cannot pretend to be instrumentally self-conscious unless they know how to arrange their own seminal texts and to draw upon established patterns and methods of inquiry."²² The result of that assertion is that any work produced in alignment with the discourse mutually agreed upon by the practitioners of each field necessarily contributes to that field's cumulative knowledge, which is itself a foundational aspect of second-order tradition. Any work that does not fit within that "shared living memory," on the other hand, is nothing more than individual intellectual venture that—no matter how objectively valuable—contributes to the great complexity of an already amorphous subject-field. In summary, the scholarship of any given discipline becomes capable of sustaining itself only once a second-order tradition has been sufficiently established so that, "it can relate to its intellectual past in narrative fashion."²³ For Capps,

Religious studies owns such a second-order tradition, and it is dependent on the same for the intellectual directions it has taken as well as for the resources on which it is able to draw. Still...[the] second-order tradition of religious studies is not yet identifiable as a clear, continuous, self-sustaining direct line of communication and transmission. Yet, no matter how difficult to identify, recover, or fashion, a working sense of this second-order tradition is absolutely

²¹ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

²² *Ibid.*, xvi.

²³ *Ibid.*

necessary to the ongoing constructive and creative work of the academic field.”

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At this juncture, it is imperative that the reader understand religious studies to be lacking in a coherent, thoroughgoing second-order tradition as it is defined above; that realization is pivotal to the desired outcomes of this essay. To truly prove that deficiency in a top-down manner would require voluminous analysis of all works considered to be relevant to what Capps deems, “a multiform subject-field within which a variety of disciplines are employed to treat a multiplicity of issues, interests and topics.”²⁵ Needless to say, such an ambitious undertaking would be even less feasible than the simple historical outline we were forced to abandon earlier in this section, and is furthermore unnecessary because of the relative ease with which we can empirically observe the resulting detriments to the field. So, in lieu of employing a deductive approach, we will straightforwardly illustrate our point by recounting an anecdote belonging to Russell T. McCutcheon, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. In an article entitled “A Modest Proposal on Method” McCutcheon recalls discussing Jonathan Z. Smith, the preeminent religious studies scholar of the 20th century, with, “theorists in our field...in the late 1980s and 1990s.”²⁶ Of that experience, McCutcheon complains,

I find many people who approvingly, even reverentially, cite Smith’s work, making the appearance of his well-known quotation on the invention of religion a genuflection required of anyone who wishes to have their work taken seriously. They know that they should read him, they make it evident that they have read him, and this is enough to gain their new status, so that they can just get on with their work as if they had never read him at all.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 331.

²⁶ McCutcheon, “A Modest Proposal on Method,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 4-5 (2013), 345.

²⁷ Ibid.

Translating McCutcheon's passage into Capps' terms, we can effectively characterize the broader problem we wish to discuss.²⁸ In general, it seems that religious studies scholars can accurately identify the "primary schools of interpretation." In the passage above, they recognize the seminal status of Smith's contributions to the field and quote a passage that appropriately epitomizes his well-known convictions on the academic study of religion (i.e. "there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study...Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy,"²⁹). Moreover, they have obviously learned the "methods of approach," precisely because they are familiar with the "traditions of religious studies scholarship"—in this instance, genuflection to Smith's words to qualify their arguments as informed and scholarly. But, when it comes to integrating those fundamental tools into a product that will help craft a narrative for religious studies—a "shared living memory of the ways in which all of these constitutive factors are related to each other"—the second-order tradition fails and collapses on itself. Adherence to it is, for the modern misguided scholar of the field, "a disciplined act of deference that, once accomplished, allows one to go about doing what one was already intending to do."³⁰ McCutcheon is not alone in his frustration. As a matter of fact, disappointment in the common modes of scholarship permeates the writings of Braun, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, and Jones (who we will discuss later) to name only a few. Thus, it seems that we are in good company detecting a sort of stagnancy within the academic study of

²⁸ I realize that we have not truly proven that all scholarship in religious studies rejects adherence to Capps' second-order tradition model. While the approach I have taken here is not systematic, it will serve to catalyze the current discussion. It would, however, be a worthwhile project to perform a comprehensive review of current religious studies literature in the hopes of validating or debunking McCutcheon's claims. For the time being we will trust that his years of expertise lend some minimum level of credence to his observation.

²⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: U Chicago, 1970), xi.

³⁰ McCutcheon, "Introducing Smith," *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, (London: Equinox Pub., 2008) 8.

religion, despite the impressively diverse body of works that comprises it. We are now equipped to answer the question originally raised by Capps' paradox: how can we call a field stagnant that has produced so extensive an intellectual oeuvre as to preclude even a cursory retelling of its short history from the realm of possibility? It is because the production of "constructive and creative work" that we would hope to see from a successful academic field is entirely dependent on second-order tradition—something that religious studies has not yet developed in full. In short, *that* is "what's wrong with religious studies."

And so, finding value in this idea that formulating a coherent, agreed-upon second-order tradition is a necessary step toward the development of any lasting discipline, we conclude that religious studies' static quality is actually not entirely surprising if we consider another of Capps' observations:

...the principal contributions and prime discoveries within the field of religious studies have been made by scholars and researchers who have understood themselves to be practitioners of the methods and disciplines of other fields: anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, psychology, theology, and other areas of intellectual interest. This is an indispensable methodological fact about the character and makeup of religious studies.³¹

Until now, we have left one vital component of second-order tradition largely untreated—the idea of good scholarship hinging on a "coordinated account..." More than the fundamental components of second-order tradition naturally and fortuitously falling into line, a field's success appears to be dependent on the active collaboration of its scholars. In accordance with Capps' work, *we*—those of us who endeavor to study some aspect of religion by way of the methods of the field—are the coordinators. By that logic, we are not only religious studies scholars, but religious studies historians with an obligation to uphold and defend the narrative

³¹ Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, xv.

that will define religious studies scholarship for ages to come. And thus, we see where the true failing of religious studies lies. It lies in *our* work. It lies in *our* unwillingness to tailor our work toward the goal of creating cumulative knowledge. Capps tells us exactly what we need to hear—and implicates those of us who identify as religious studies scholars—when he says that the most influential thinkers of our field did not have us in mind when they wrote their theses. Their work, after which ours is modeled out of necessity for adhering to the methods of the field, was crafted in alignment with the second-order traditions of other, more successful fields, leaving our own woefully underdeveloped. Without the benefit of second-order tradition we in religious studies have come to adopt a conventional scholarship in which, “getting lost in the details and failing to understand the larger project,”³² is the norm. So where do we go from here?

We could take either one of two approaches, as we ultimately need to address the considerations broached by both trains of thought, and neither discussion necessarily warrants prior knowledge of the other. We have chosen, almost arbitrarily, to arrange them in the following order, and have tried as much as possible to create a logical flow from one topic to the other: 1) We dedicated a considerable amount of space in the opening paragraphs of the Introduction to the suggestion that there is some significance to the modern conception of science as opposite to religion. We also clearly rejected that conception as nothing more than artifice, and instead suggested a more complex relationship governed by delicate interdependencies. One important direction that this discussion must take, therefore, looks toward the fabrication of that historical narrative. By examining its construction we can contextualize the relationship between that narrative and the field of religious studies, which we

³² McCutcheon, “Introducing Smith,” 8.

will observe to be tremendously valuable to our discourse, and the development of our corrective model in the following sections of this essay. 2) We have suggested that religious studies scholarship lacks some elusive quality that we termed *the spirit of modern science*. At this point in the discussion we have built a strong enough foundation to determine with considerable certainty what that quality might be. We must therefore find occasion to develop our understanding of how *the spirit of modern science* intersects with the discussion of second-order tradition presented above.

Inventing Historical Narrative

The previous subsection touched on the deleterious effects that a lack of second-order tradition has had on religious studies scholarship, and contended that the discipline suffers most notably from its inability, “to relate to its intellectual past in narrative fashion.” In this section, we take a short and much needed break from the primary argument of the essay to suggest one possible reason for that inadequacy. The short discussion that follows will investigate the possibility that existing historical narratives have made the implementation of *the spirit of modern science* particularly challenging for religious studies scholars. To begin our inquiry and gauge its importance, we will briefly revisit an argument put forward in the Introduction. There, we stated:

Nowhere are the repercussions of scholarship without second-order tradition more apparent than in the emergence of what Daniel Pals terms “antireductionist” theories of religion, which generally contend that thinkers like Freud, Marx, and Durkheim, “appeal to something subconscious or irrational to explain why [religion] persists,” and that, “such theories rest on a serious misunderstanding.”³³

³³ The sentence has been somewhat altered in its reproduction here in the interest of providing context.

Without engaging in too thorough an analysis, we are now capable of detecting the real tragedy behind that particular intellectual development in religious studies, and by extension others of its kind. By insinuating at the outright that functionalist accounts rely on “a serious misunderstanding,” antireductionists preclude any of their subsequent results from contributing to the same cumulative knowledge as the influential thinkers whose work they repudiate. Therefore, before their work has even begun, we can say with certainty that it will not serve to hone a second-order tradition for religious studies. The natural question to ask, then, is *why do they do it?*

For the time being, we simply recall that science and religion have an incredibly complex relationship that defies the all-too-popular notion that they are fundamentally in contention with one another. But, to many lay people and scholars alike who take that myth at face value, “Not only is the optimistic vision of a...union of religion and science dimmed by science’s discrediting of traditional religious belief, but it seems...that the sciences are forever debarred from helping religion.”³⁴ Working from that fatalistic perspective, who could reasonably expect religious studies scholars to embrace *the spirit of modern science* in their treatments of a seemingly incompatible object of study? Who could expect anything else from scholars like Eliade, who fear that by tailoring their work to address the *sui generis* component of religion, they cannot possibly stand alongside functionalist Darwinian models and hope to be taken seriously? Is it really any surprise, then, that Eliade chooses to fervently reject functionalism, and to suggest that the experience of the sacred is all that matters? From where he sits, he must dismiss the idea that religion is an expression of some other aspect of human life if he wishes to

³⁴ Ralph W. Burhoe, “The Phenomenon of Religion Seen Scientifically,” *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, (New York: Wiley, 197), 19.

achieve the result that it is *sui generis*. He cannot work in the opposite manner, and start by accepting the scholarship of those who, “sought...in primitive religions a weapon which could...be used with deadly effect against Christianity,” no matter how formative their ideas to his field. And so we turn to the birth of religious studies for some insight into the powerful narrative constructions that have presented such barriers to our development as a field.

Since Max Müller first presented his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* in 1870 there has been no dearth of theorists working to advance our understanding of the uniquely human phenomena we collectively dub “religion.” Müller’s call for cross-cultural scientific study of the function and form of worship throughout the world was met by contemporaries, as many have noted³⁵, with a combination of excited support and stern criticism. That ambivalence over the utility of studying religion—still remarkably pervasive in today’s secular public—was largely the result of a Victorian intellectual ethos that can be shown to align closely with distorted, albeit compelling, pseudo-historicist narratives of the time. John William Draper—the first president of the American Chemical Society and founding faculty member of the NYU School of Medicine—and Andrew Dickson White—the first president of the American Historical Association and co-founder of Cornell University—represent two notable scientific voices of the late 19th century whose works retrospectively pitted science against religion and vice versa as far back as the execution of the Alexandrian mathematician Hypatia in 415 CE.³⁶ Together, they and

³⁵ See Daniel Pals’ *Nine Theories of Religion*. Also, Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay in *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915*, where she writes, “Though warmly received at Oxford, Müller was perplexed and alienated by the atmosphere of tension that theological differences seemed to engender there. As far as he could see, the disputes that aroused such passion had nothing to do with ‘true religion.’ Müller certainly regarded himself as a sincere believer, yet even at this early period, his theological commitments were minimal; ‘true religion’ was simply the ‘rediscovery of the eternal union between God’ and ourselves.”

³⁶ David C. Lindberg notes that, “In some accounts Hypatia’s murder marked the ‘death-blow’ to ancient science and philosophy,” and thus giving rise to an age of Christian dogmatic dominance of Western thought. (Numbers, Kindle location 112)

their followers can be seen to have manufactured a convincing and captivating history, which maintains that proponents of the natural sciences overcame oppressive and conservative forces of a dangerously traditionalist Church to usher in the Scientific Revolution and push the West into an era of unadulterated empirical discovery. Their so-called Conflict Thesis held that,

The tranquillity of society depends so much on the stability of its religious convictions, that no one can be justified in wantonly disturbing them. But faith is in its nature unchangeable, stationary; Science is in its nature progressive; and eventually a divergence between them, impossible to conceal, must take place. It then becomes the duty of those whose lives have made them familiar with both modes of thought, to present modestly, but firmly, their views; to compare the antagonistic pretensions calmly, impartially, philosophically.³⁷

It was by way of that exaggerated record, modern historians of science suggest, that popular history was rewritten by powerful American and European intellectuals to strengthen, “the portrayal of early Christianity as a haven of anti-intellectualism, a fountainhead of antiscientific sentiment, and one of the primary agents responsible for Europe’s descent into what are popularly referred to as the Dark Ages.”³⁸ That attitude—perhaps best understood as an immoderate rejection of Pauline and Aquinian theological entreatments for Christians to abandon worldly reason as a basis for faith in God—was therefore propagated by the educated Victorian elite, and ultimately helped popularize the idea that religion is fundamentally incompatible with progress. From the evidence presented above and much more that we cannot consider here due to limitations of space, the proposal that the Church has always been a hindrance to scientific progress is one that, “Historians of science have known for years,” to be, “more propaganda than history”³⁹. But, open any elementary school science or history textbook and the pervasiveness of

³⁷ John William Draper, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*, (New York: D. Appleton, 1875), vii.

³⁸ Lindberg, “Myth 1: That the Rise of Christianity was Responsible for the Demise of Ancient Science,” *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion*, (Kindle location 119).

³⁹ Numbers, “Introduction,” *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion*, (Kindle locations 90-91).

that propaganda becomes obvious. We learn from a young age that the Church has silenced, tortured and/or killed the thinkers who we are told represent the foundations of modern scientific thought: Hypatia, Bruno, Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, the list goes on... What we do not consider is that the political transgressions of those figures may actually offer far more compelling reasons than their scientific discoveries that the Church would be inclined to persecute them. If we consider David C. Lindberg's account of Hypatia's murder, for instance:

...Hypatia got caught up in a political struggle between Cyril, an ambitious and ruthless churchman eager to extend his authority, and Hypatia's friend Orestes, the imperial prefect who represented the Roman Empire. In spite of the fact that Orestes was a Christian, Cyril used his friendship with the pagan Hypatia against him and accused her of practicing magic and witchcraft. Although killed largely in [a] gruesome manner...—as a mature woman of about sixty years—her death had everything to do with local politics and virtually nothing to do with science.

⁴⁰

It is not surprising, then, that recent accounts of various histories purporting to locate causality in some constant state of conflict between scientific and religious pursuits have come under attack in academic spheres as, “attempts to keep alive an old myth.” That myth, as we saw above, was carefully constructed to shape the historical narrative collectively agreed upon by natural scientists of the 19th century, and therefore to refine the second-order traditions of their respective fields. While that myth has served powerfully to give direction to the natural sciences in the way that Capps describes, it is regrettably at odds with the long-enduring universal desire to understand humanity's relationship with “the divine”—the driving force of religious studies.

And so we return to Max Müller, whose, “new science [of religion] was to stand on the shoulders of comparative philology,”⁴¹ thereby embracing the scholarly standards of the same

⁴⁰ Lindberg, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion*, (Kindle location 115).

⁴¹ Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915*, (Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 2010), 51.

intellectual community that had worked so hard, so recently to distinguish itself as entirely separate from the Church. But despite the apparent novelty in Müller's proposal, the closely interwoven histories of science and religion artificially rent apart by Victorian polemicists such as Draper and White virtually assure us that the 'father of religious studies' was not the first to envision a mode of inquiry that would elucidate the nature of religious practice by adhering to the customs of formal scholarship. After all, for a long period in history, the Church had served as an intellectual hub, and only recently had the natural sciences become distinct disciplines whose scholars sought to refute religious dogma. Daniel Pals speculates in *Nine Theories of Religion* that, "Questions as to what religion is and why different people practice it as they do doubtless reach back as far as the human race itself...when the first traveler ventured outside the local clan or village and discovered that neighbors had other gods with different names." Pals goes on to explore the rich history of humankind's impulse to explain religion by calculating, "often quite creatively, how it had come to be what it was."⁴² And although we could seek a worthy example of the difficulties caused by competing historical narrative in a thousand different places throughout religious history, one need not look far—with regard to either space or time—from the podium at which Müller stood proposing the science of religion to find in another circle of scholars the very same impetus for a modern approach to the study of religion.

We take as an example what Albert Schweitzer would later term the "Quest for the historical Jesus," which had begun in Germany nearly 100 years prior, and in its wake inspired a wealth of European scholars to undertake similar endeavors on behalf of other world religions.⁴³

⁴² Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 2.

⁴³ Consider Sir Edwin Arnold's 1897 book *The Light of Asia*, which sought to artfully recount the story of the Gautama Buddha's life and journey toward enlightenment in order to inspire Western minds to embrace a figure whose significance is surpassed only by Jesus.

Such projects, influential as they may have been to those in the upper echelons of Christian society, were by and large doomed at the outright to criticisms exposing the religious underpinnings and inherent biases of dubiously impartial work. Schweitzer writes, “The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma,”⁴⁴ and in doing so validates a widespread concern—both then and now—that the analytical work being produced on the topic of religion, “simply reflected the religious assumptions of the scholars who had created it.”⁴⁵ Some later writers including Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth, who “emerged in a type of theological attack upon the historicist enterprise,”⁴⁶ would even come to cast an ecclesiastical shadow well into the 20th century over those who truly wished to reconstruct a secular historical narrative of the life and legacy of Jesus of Nazareth. And others still, such as Martin Kähler, “described the Quest as a dead end,” echoing an attitude adopted by Adolf von Harnack, who staunchly opposed Müller on the grounds that, “Christianity alone is what matters; other faiths do not.”⁴⁷ The science of religion, it seems, is not the only field to be caught up in a battle of competing narratives that make unified scholarship a sheer impracticality. It is certain, then, that the outcome of Müller’s 19th-century appeal for the legitimization of a scientific study of religion reflects, as we have seen, a broader rift between humanity’s persisting scientific curiosity over religious practice and the willingness of Western scholarly communities to collectively, harmoniously engage the subject.

⁴⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 4.

⁴⁵ James Carleton Paget, “Quests for the Historical Jesus,” *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, (New York: Cambridge U Press, 2001), 134.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 2.

Scientific controversies and theological oppositions aside, Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* is most effectively examined from the perspective of those to whom it was targeted, and in the context of what those individuals would have known to be 'true' at the time: Indeed, for a portion of the intellectual Victorian audience to whom Müller spoke, where *the spirit of modern science* reflected intellectual and technological progress, religion was a tether to the past and to conservative ideologies that had hindered scientific development for hundreds of years. For others, Christianity represented the cultural, intellectual and theological perfection of human endeavors. A science of religion, then, strange though it may have seemed, offered to the most liberal, atheistic minds the promise of "objectivity" and "impartiality." It was a chance to remove religion from the realm of theologians, whose work was tainted by unsubstantiable claims of access to 'ultimate truth'; it was a chance to reappropriate the scientific impulse to the ends of debunking the Church—a task demanded by the invented narrative of conflict we just examined. And in that way, religious studies scholarship itself has served to reinforce that narrative of conflict, which we have seen is ultimately damaging to a field in need of a second-order tradition that will support its endeavor to make religion intelligible.

The brief discussion above is not, by any means, intended to be a complete treatment of the subject matter. Instead, the goal was simply to point out some of the ways in which the historical and ideological narratives set in place by the dominant academic fields and religious institutions of the modern era have served to set science and religion at odds. Why, then, does religious studies lack *the spirit of modern science*? Because we have been convinced for far too long that science and religion are incompatible.

The Spirit of Modern Science

In the subsection entitled “*Interpreting the Issue*” we looked to Walter Capps for a precise formulation of the fundamental problem this essay addresses: religious studies scholars have heretofore failed to create a second-order tradition for their field. And, more importantly, it will not suffice to simply make that observation and walk away in the hopes that the field will correct its own course. The task of developing a second-order tradition, we have seen, falls to us as we conduct our research. At this point we have also explored some of the barriers to achieving that goal up to this point in our history. But even with the knowledge that second-order tradition is valuable to the success of an academic field and an understanding of what challenges we face, still another question arises: surely the vast majority of academic fields have developed their second-order traditions without an acute awareness of how exactly that should be done. After all, there is no handbook (that I have found) on how to start a discipline, and talk of second-order tradition is not exactly common, even amongst scholars. So how have others done what we cannot seem to do on our own? We have our diagnosis, now how can we begin to write a prescription for religious studies?

Careful analysis of the last Capps passage we examined will reveal that he does more than simply illuminate the issue at hand. He actually (inadvertently) makes a specific suggestion as to a possible solution—not in what he writes, but in what he does not. For the sake of convenience, we will reproduce the list of fields to which Capps claims our seminal scholars belong: anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, psychology, and theology. From that diverse list, one cannot help but notice the stark absence of the natural sciences, which is not to say, of course, that the natural sciences are completely unrepresented in religious studies

scholarship, but simply that their non-appearance is meaningful in and of itself. The significance of that omission is made more apparent when we consider Capps' statement that, "when religious studies was formed, it was primarily the sets of field and disciplinary associations and arrangements that were new. Many of the methods and materials had been available to scholarship before, but not in the combination and manner by which they were joined. The arrangements, the interrelationships, the dynamics by which methods and substance were conjoined, and the specific intellectual foci and intention were new."⁴⁸ Capps' account of the formation of religious studies tells us that while all of the ingredients for a successful academic field are available, either not all of them are being utilized or they have not been properly reappropriated to serve the new "intellectual foci and intention" of religious studies. Also worth noting is that if we were to name the major contributing disciplines to the second-order traditions of those fields that *were* listed we would be hard-pressed to go without naming a natural science (most obviously biology or chemistry). And so we observe a clear deficiency. Religious studies enjoys the benefits of utilizing, "substance, materials and means of access,"⁴⁹ from a wide variety of academic fields, but cannot claim to derive any of its "distinguishing formative characteristics,"⁵⁰ from the fields of study that have grown most rapidly in the modern era. Thus, we are inclined to suggest that leaving the natural sciences by the wayside may be where the problem lies, and that in order to find a corrective course we should consider a more important place for the natural sciences in the second-order tradition of religious studies.

Here we introduce a passage we contend will help us begin to do that. Although it may seem tangential at the present moment, our motivations will soon become clear:

⁴⁸ Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, 332.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

...spending the year in a community composed predominantly of social scientists confronted me with unanticipated problems about the differences between such communities and those of the natural scientists among whom I had been trained. Particularly, I was struck by the number and extent of the overt disagreements between social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods...[S]omehow, the practice of astronomy, physics, chemistry, or biology normally fails to evoke the controversies over fundamentals that today often seem endemic among, say, psychologists or sociologists.

The scholar who wrote those words more than half a century ago was initially trained in theoretical physics doctoral program at Harvard University, but changed his career path shortly thereafter to become a renowned historian of science when he discovered what would later become his thesis in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Thomas Kuhn's work is a milestone in the philosophy of science and countless volumes have since been written evaluating, analyzing, and extending his ideas. Although Kuhn's critics are many, his contribution to the inauguration of, "the 1960s historiographic revolution...by providing a new image of science,"⁵¹ has earned him many more followers, and as a result his work has loomed large over the philosophy of science and the social sciences for over fifty years. For our purposes in this essay, his conception of what makes science science is the key to both understanding the nature of progress in an academic field and to linking that concept with what we have heretofore deemed *the spirit of modern science*. We will dedicate only a small amount of space in this essay to summarizing Kuhn's work, for further resources delineating and analyzing the exact argument laid out in his book are readily available to the curious reader. Additionally, although his broader hypothesis is consistent with our work here, we are primarily interested in highlighting only a few arguments that will be most useful to our goal in this essay.

⁵¹ James A. Marcum, "Kuhn, Thomas S." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/kuhn-ts/#H3>>.

And so we return to Kuhn's motivations for conducting his philosophical inquiry.

Importantly, of the difference between scholarship in the social and natural sciences he writes:

Attempting to discover the source of that difference led me to recognize the role in scientific research of what I have since called 'paradigms.' These I take to be universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.

In general Kuhn contends that science progresses through alternating periods of "normal science"—in which his so-called "paradigms" are established, agreed upon and used to normatively direct research questions of the field—and "revolution"—in which new data that are incompatible with the reigning paradigms demand the emergence of new scientific theories to address that "crisis." And with the implementation of new paradigms, previously unsolvable puzzles become sanctioned research topics. Practitioners of the natural sciences, he claims, have fine-tuned that cycle to the point that it has become a perpetual undercurrent pushing their work forward in the modern age. For him, then, "the organization of their work [is] the distinctive feature of developed sciences. It [is] possible for scientific investigators to build on the work of their colleagues, using standardized dependable practices that define what count[s] as acceptable scientific results."⁵² The efficiency with which cumulative knowledge is generated within a field becomes for Kuhn a logical metric for that field's success because, "Understanding the possibility of 'cumulative knowledge' [is] a matter of identifying the conditions under which scientists consensually accept a set of standards embodied in exemplars of proper practice for their area of inquiry." And were that the extent of Kuhn's message, we might not find our way forward in his work. But he continues, "These conditions are plainly absent from large ranges of

⁵² Vasso Kindi and Theodore Arabatzis, *Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Revisited*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 42.

the social studies.”⁵³ And in that statement, we find our key. McCutcheon and Capps helped us see that religious studies is deficient in something that science enjoys much to its benefit, and that second-order tradition is necessary to create cumulative knowledge. Now Kuhn has offered us the insight that *the spirit of modern science* is, precisely, ownership of a coherent second-order tradition. When we understand that connection, Kuhn’s work becomes both a diagnostic tool and a corrective prescription. By measuring religious studies against Kuhn’s proposed cycle of scientific progress, we can learn exactly in what ways we have failed to live up to our potential, and we can begin to chart a course for the future. Thus, we arrive at our hypothesis: in order to infuse *the spirit of modern science* into religious studies, we must find a way to transplant the intellectual values propounded by practitioners of the natural sciences onto the work of religious studies scholars.

(III) Anticipating the Questions

In this section we will continue discussing the application of Kuhn’s work to our goal of restructuring religious studies scholarship. But before we can begin to develop our corrective model, we are obligated to address two major questions that the astute reader is likely to ask with regard our work thus far. We have therefore elected to continue our discussion in the context of those questions:

1. *Why place such importance on science? What is the scientific method’s inherent value, and why should religious studies look to scientific methodology to supplement its scholarship?*

⁵³ Ibid.

We anticipate that the most pressing questions for the reader who has carefully followed the logic presented in this essay will be the ones listed above. Indeed, when we initially set out to inspect the problems that have caused religious studies to stagnate, we almost arbitrarily called its missing quality *the spirit of modern science*. In the course of this essay, we have found value in discussing the relationship between religion and science as it pertains to a historical narrative that has influenced the development of religious studies, as well as in the absence of the natural sciences from its second-order tradition. Furthermore, we have looked to the natural sciences as exemplars of academic success, and it has only been by that comparison that we have found reason to call religious studies stagnant at all. So the questions stand: why place such importance on science? If we simply elect not to use Kuhn's metric for academic success, will we not find that our field has succeeded in other ways?

These questions are most compellingly addressed when we ask ourselves, as Kuhn does in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, what makes a science a science? Kuhn notes, "To a very great extent the term 'science' is reserved for fields that...progress in obvious ways. Nowhere does this show more clearly than in the recurrent debates about whether one or another of the contemporary social sciences is really a science...Their ostensible issue throughout is a definition of the vexing term."⁵⁴ And before we even approach the logical conclusion of that line of reasoning, we can draw an immediate parallel to religious studies. After all, we have already examined Max Müller's proposal for the pursuit of a "science of religion" as the birth of the field, and since that time it is clear that scholars of the field have engaged in numerous debates over the scientific status of religious studies.

⁵⁴ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: U of Chicago), 160.

As those dialogues typically conceive of it, a genuinely scientific approach to religion would be one that attempts to substantiate cogent theoretical conjecture through the routine analysis of quantifiable data and meaningful engagement with the customs of scientific research. For too long, the argument goes, preeminent scholars of religion have attempted to extract and purify the core elements of religious life by means of armchair research rooted in antiquated accounts of cultural practices; too much of what we “know” in religious studies derives from speculative analogy, is drawn from more developed fields of study, requires cautionless extrapolation from isolated field work with particular populations, or is born out of simple theoretical engagement with works that employ inadequate methodology. The result has been excessive emphasis on the importance of theory while particular scientific research is left somewhat by the wayside. Hent de Vries, one scholar who argues that religious studies has remained largely unscientific, suggests, “The nineteenth-century scholars made abundant use of the new materials...As soon as some puzzling new phenomena were found, a new theory was proposed.”⁵⁵ For him and others who argue similarly, theoretical eagerness may have proven valuable to the nascent field of religious studies as it sought to demonstrate that it met an intellectual demand, but over the years it has led modern scholars of religion to complain that, “religious studies do not provide us with *fully formed theories*. Indeed, the theories in the whole of the social/human sciences come nowhere near the logical rigor or empirical testability of theories in the natural sciences.”⁵⁶

Looking to more recent scholarship, American sociologist Robert Wuthnow posed the question in a 2003 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Is There a Place for

⁵⁵ Hent de Vries, *The Study of Religion: A Historical Approach*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 220.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 303. Emphasis added.

‘Scientific’ Studies in Religion?” In that article, Wuthnow addresses his concerns with regard to such concepts as “empirical rigor,” “systematic investigation,” and “the criterion of replicability” as they are employed within religious studies. Even more recently, a 2012 article entitled “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion” by Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe—two founding members of the North American Association for the Study of Religion—sparked a lively debate warranting a published reply to its four most worthy critiques only a few months later. Martin and Wiebe argued, in large part because of the failure of religious studies to move away from speculative theoretical work in favor of scientific discovery that informs and modifies standing theory, that outcomes in the field have been stunted:

...the history of religious studies has been one of simultaneous institutional success and intellectual bankruptcy. On the one hand, there are now numerous departments, institutes, associations, congresses, and journals dedicated to religious studies. On the other hand, the academic study of religion has failed to live up to earlier promises of theoretical coherence and scientific integrity; indeed, such promises have been severely undermined.

⁵⁷

The existence of religious studies departments at major research universities, they assert, is evidence of institutional success that is not mirrored by the intellectual growth of the field. Martin’s and Wiebe’s article met considerable resistance after its publication, with some scholars offering stinging criticism of the logical soundness of their thesis. For the most part, however, even their critics do not attack their general disillusionment on the basis of substandard methodological and scientific rigor of the field in comparison to that demonstrated by the natural and social sciences. Silence on that matter is indicative, at least, that modern scholars are used to arguments claiming that imprudent focus on theoretical and methodological concerns is responsible for a lackadaisical scientific ethic in religious studies as a whole.

⁵⁷ Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012), 594.

Thus, we observe a long tradition of debate over the scientific status of religious studies throughout the history of the field. Interestingly, Kuhn does not choose to engage in such debates at close range, or to offer any hard-and-fast solution to determine a field's scientific status based on his research. Instead, he offers only the insight that, "These debates have parallels in...fields that are [now] unhesitatingly labeled science."⁵⁸ That statement should give us pause because it insinuates that the sciences were once where religious studies is now, which would drastically alter the way we conceive of religious studies' scientific status. As Ralph Burhoe, a research professor in theology and science at the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, writes in his contribution to *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, "If the scientific study of religion is in a state comparable to that of biology a few centuries ago, perhaps we can look forward to a comparable future."⁵⁹ Our dubious scientific status, then, might only mean that, "We have not yet had our Darwin; we have hardly had our Linnaeus to sharpen our basic descriptive terms and their classifications; and we have not sufficiently utilized the tested conceptual or symbolic systems of other pertinent disciplines to help structure and order our data."⁶⁰

In the previous paragraph, we quoted Kuhn and used an ellipsis to remove a phrase that we had not yet had occasion to consider. In its original form, the sentence reads, "These debates have parallels in the pre-paradigm periods of fields that are unhesitatingly labeled science."⁶¹ What, we must ask, is a field's pre-paradigm period? For Kuhn, the pre-paradigm period is that during which a developing discipline questions its scientific identity much in the way religious

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Burhoe, "The Phenomenon of Religion Seen Scientifically," 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 160.

studies does now. He finds the typical debates over methodology and empirical rigor exhibited during a field's pre-paradigm period to be misdirected expressions of more pertinent questions:

Why does my field fail to move ahead in the way that, say, physics does? What changes in the technique or method or ideology would enable it to do so? These are not...questions that could respond to an agreement on definition. Furthermore, if precedent from the natural sciences serves, they will cease to be a source of concern not when a definition is found, but when the groups that now doubt their own status achieve a consensus about their past and present accomplishments.⁶²

That passage, in addition to providing insight into the scientific status of religious studies, is reminiscent of our definition of second-order tradition. And so we review: Capps helped us to determine that religious studies has stagnated because it lacks a coherent second-order tradition. McCutcheon helped us to identify that our failing lies not in our schools of interpretation, our methods of approach, or our traditions of religious studies scholarship, but in our ability to integrate each of those components into a shared living historical narrative of our field. And now, Kuhn suggests that religious studies exists in a pre-paradigm period of scientific revolution, and that if its scholars find a way to, “achieve a consensus about...past and present accomplishments,” its scientific identity will become apparent as it enters into its first period of normal science. Kuhn is calling for all academic fields to embrace *the spirit of modern science*. Kuhn's words provide a perfect summary:

“In short, it is only during periods of normal science that progress seems both obvious and assured. During those periods...the scientific community could view the fruits of its work in no other way. With respect to normal science, then, part of the answer to the problem of progress lies simply in the eye of the beholder. Scientific progress is not different in kind from progress in other fields, but the absence at most times of competing schools that question each other's aims and standards makes the progress of a normal-scientific community far easier to see...once the reception of a common paradigm has freed the scientific community from the need constantly to re-examine its first

⁶² Ibid., 160-161.

principles, the members of that community can concentrate exclusively upon the subtlest and most esoteric of the phenomena that concern it. Inevitably, that does increase both the effectiveness and the efficiency with which the group as a whole solves new problems.”⁶³

What comes to mind when we consider the current state of religious studies scholarship is an image that Sir Francis Bacon conjured up in his 1620 treatise, *Novum Organum* to describe the state of the natural sciences at the time. Bacon envisioned science as a grand, fallen obelisk that each scientist wished to re-erect with her bare hands. For him the result was a, “kind of mad effort and useless combination of forces,”⁶⁴ and in reference to the natural philosophers of the Scientific Revolution, he therefore contended that, “Those who have taken upon them to lay down the law of nature as a thing already searched out and understood, have therein done philosophy and the sciences great injury. For as they have been successful in inducing belief, so they have been effective in quenching and stopping inquiry; and have done more harm by spoiling and putting an end to other men’s efforts than good by their own.”⁶⁵ And as a solution, Bacon proposed the scientific method. So why place such importance on science? What is the scientific method’s inherent value, and why should religious studies look to scientific methodology to supplement its scholarship?

Science is important because it is synonymous with progress, not only for fields already considered to lie within that realm, but for fields with questionable scientific status as well. The scientific method, regardless of whether it can be explicitly applied to the questions religious studies scholars investigate, is symbolic of *the spirit of modern science*. So our suggestion is not that religious studies scholarship should adopt the scientific method, but consider it a valuable

⁶³ Ibid., 163-164.

⁶⁴ Francis Bacon, “Preface,” *Novum Organum*. <<http://www.bartleby.com/39/22.html>>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

component of a model second-order tradition. In that way, religious studies can strive to become as successful as the natural scientific fields that were once where it is now.

2. *Religious studies is not a natural science, and therefore should not be treated as one. Why, then, should scholars of religious studies hope to develop tools comparable to the mathematical laws employed by natural scientists?*

We dealt with these issues to some extent in the previous section. Although religious studies is not a natural science, it does occupy a marginal scientific space that we have seen is a precursor to unquestioned scientific status. Whether or not achieving that status should be of the utmost importance to the field of religious studies is irrelevant when we consider what makes a science a science. When we realize that science is simply a name given to fields that rapidly progress through the cycle Kuhn laid out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, we come to see that our success as a field will not rely on a change of metric or an alternative view of what success can mean to an unscientific field; it will rely on our ability to transcend pre-paradigm limitations by constructing a coherent second-order tradition—by embodying *the spirit of modern science*.

And so, we arrive at the questions posed in this subsection. In the Introduction we briefly suggested that, having arrived at this point in our argument, we would begin to think about whether religious studies scholars could ever hope to develop something similar to the mathematical laws used by natural scientists, and if so, why they should want to. According to Kuhn's theory, new paradigms, whether during the formation of a scientific field (pre-paradigm period) or during the restructuring activities of a revolutionary period, are always agreed upon communally, and the paradigm-shift therefore occurs by consensus of the field's practitioners. In

that way, for Kuhn, “Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all.”⁶⁶ For what we now know as the natural sciences, mathematics has served as the language by which phenomena become intelligible to the scholar. There is no shortage of natural scientists who famously attest to the beauty and import of mathematical laws, but perhaps Galileo said it best when he wrote that the universe, “cannot be read until we have learnt the language and become familiar with the characters in which it is written. It is written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to comprehend a single word.”⁶⁷ Needless to say, the same mathematical apparatus clearly cannot be applied to religion as it has been to the natural sciences, and in that regard we should not strive to do so. What we should note, however, is that to create a common language is to develop common ground on which a community’s second-order tradition can be built.

Here, we revisit once more the emergence of antireductionist theory as an example of misguided scholarship within the field of religious studies. With our new understanding of *the spirit of modern science* we can finally formulate a complete criticism: The assertion put forward by antireductionist theorists that functionalist accounts rely on “a serious misunderstanding,” connotes their intent to contribute to a different cumulative knowledge than that crystallized by previous theorists—it elects to redefine the subject and start anew. Scholarship of that nature represents a rejection of second-order tradition, and is therefore answerable to our observation that today’s stagnant religious studies lacks *the spirit of modern science*. Importantly, though, we are not suggesting that insights provided by the antireductionist perspective are

⁶⁶ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 210.

⁶⁷ Galileo Galilei, *Opere II Saggiatore*, 171.

unimportant—that would be to engage in the same type of destructive scholarship as they—but merely that their stance is too strongly opposed to the functional theories that came before them. We observe that religious studies is dominated by theories that are in disagreement over even the most fundamental aspects of religion, and that as such we have as of yet failed to form even a single technology that can benefit the field as a whole. So we turn again to Kuhn, who says,

Philosophers of science have repeatedly demonstrated that more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data. History of science indicates that, particularly in the early developmental stages of a new paradigm, it is not even very difficult to invent such alternates. But that invention of alternates is just what scientists seldom undertake except during the pre-paradigm stage of their science's development and at very special occasions during its subsequent evolution. So long as the tools a paradigm supplies continue to prove capable of solving the problems it defines, science moves fastest and penetrates most deeply through confident employment of those tools. The reason is clear. As in manufacture so in science—retooling is an extravagance to be reserved for the occasion that demands it.⁶⁸

And so to Eliade's complaint that, "It is unfortunate that we do not have at our disposal a more precise word than 'religion' to denote the experience of the sacred,"⁶⁹ we reply that 'religion' is a word that denotes not only the experience of the sacred, but also to encompass what goes hand-in-hand with that experience. It is meant to capture both the inward and the outward expression, the physical and metaphysical manifestation. It is meant to embody all that the sacred *does* in our world, as well as the experience itself. We suggest these things not because there is some universal definition of religion, but because, "what one does within an academic field depends on where one is standing. Where one stands profoundly influences what one discovers. Furthermore, where one stands and what one discovers are implicit in one's scholarly intentions."⁷⁰ Eliade's repudiation of functionalism, then, is prompted by a question

⁶⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 210.

⁶⁹ Jones, "What the Doing Does," 88.

⁷⁰ Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, xvi.

(i.e. “what of the *sui generis* component of religion?”) far too esoteric to warrant such a drastic turn away from thinkers like Freud, Marx and Durkheim entirely, and to do so is to engage in pre-paradigm scholarship as Kuhn defines it. Instead we must recognize that all of these conceptions of religion have a place within the field’s second-order tradition. All of them offer valuable insights. But until we as a field have developed a common way of expressing our results universally to other religious studies scholars without frivolously discarding valuable work, we have not understood what Kuhn tells us about the success of an academic field.

In terms of Kuhn’s metaphor, Eliade and other theorists who argue similarly, by way of their extreme scholarship, set out to retool the factory and burn everything that had been produced by the old machinery—an incomprehensible and economically disastrous move from a rational standpoint. So here we are. In one hand we hold the key to structuring the intellectual endeavors of a successful field—a science. And in the other we hold our crude object of study—religion. There is only one way forward from here.

(IV) Conclusion: Developing Our Model

Our final exercise is to use everything that we have learned throughout the course of this essay to construct a model for future religious studies scholarship. We have come to understand not only that religious studies lacks *the spirit of modern science*, but also how we can put that failure into the precise language of second-order tradition. And so it would seem that we have laid the foundation for a scientifically revitalized religious studies to emerge and usher in an age

of Kuhnian revolution for the field. However, we concluded the previous section by calling for a unified language in religious studies—a common ground on which our second-order tradition can be built—which can rightfully seem an absolute impracticality at the present time. We therefore wish to conclude this work with a specific, attainable directive for future scholarship in religious studies. In order to understand how we might be able to move forward, then, we turn one last time to Kuhn for comfort:

...if the coherence of the research tradition is to be understood in terms of rules, some specification of common ground in the corresponding area is needed. As a result, the search for a body of rules competent to constitute a given normal research tradition becomes a source of continual and deep frustration. Recognizing that frustration, however, makes it possible to diagnose its source. Scientists can agree that a Newton, Lavoisier, Maxwell, or Einstein has produced an apparently permanent solution to a group of outstanding problems and still disagree, sometimes without being aware of it, about the particular abstract characteristics that make those solutions permanent. They can, that is, agree in their *identification* of a paradigm without agreeing on, or even attempting to produce, a full *interpretation* or *rationalization* of it. Lack of a standard interpretation or of an agreed reduction to rules will not prevent a paradigm from guiding research.⁷¹

And so, we see that this essay does not call for an abandonment of theoretical work *per se*. It actually does not call for any kind of abandonment—indeed it does quite the opposite. Instead of condemning particular views or scholars, it finds issue with destructive methods and suggests instead an adjustment of our attitudes toward the theoretical work of our scholarly predecessors, whether we precisely agree with their “abstract interpretations” or not. And in that way, it asks us to contribute to a cumulative knowledge of religious studies in lieu of perpetuating, “The argumentative carry-on—the constant ripping up and starting over, the lack of consensus concerning fundamental questions of method and ontology,” that sets religious studies

⁷¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 44.

scholarship apart from, “the industrious application of natural science practitioners in mature fields.”⁷²

Throughout this essay, we have implicated antireductionist theorists in partaking of a brand of scholarship that has been detrimental to religious studies. And while that choice has perhaps painted an exaggerated picture of antireductionists contributions to religious studies, it was not made at random. Andrea Sun-Mee Jones begins her groundbreaking work in “What the Doing Does” by observing that, “The field is...bifurcated into camps of meaning,” one dominated by functionalist theories and their adherents, and the other by antireductionist theories and theirs. Jones warns, much as we have, that, “the language game of reductionism has untoward consequences. There is a way in which talk about reductionism... close[s] off possibilities.”⁷³ And it is in her proposed solution to the problem of reductionism that we find our prescription for the future of religious studies.

Jones effectively and persuasively argues that the current state of religious studies is dominated by a search for the fundamental essence of religion. She observes that, “True meaning, for Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, becomes that which is simultaneously obscured from the participant and revealed to the theorist in religious practice. Their searches imply a quest for a messianic *meaning an sich*, just as much as Eliade, Otto, and Smith’s, only they locate it entirely outside of ordinary consciousness.” For her, the problem arises because both functionalists and phenomenologists are trying to make statements about the fundamental truth behind religion, of which there can only be one. In other words, they are trying to occupy the same space. For Jones, then, religious studies has stagnated much in the same way that

⁷² Kindi and Arabatzis, *Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Revisited*, 72.

⁷³ Jones, “What the Doing Does,” 105.

McCutcheon, Capps and Kuhn observe it has. And where they have helped us to identify the problem and suggest that religious studies needs to embrace *the spirit of modern science* by seeking out common ground for the establishment of a second-order tradition, she offers a way to reconcile disjunctive theories to the benefit of the field by suggesting that, “an alternative might be to stop asking the positivist question about the essence of a religious practice and instead be content with ‘carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.’ Instead of deciphering the secret behind what people do, the scholar can hope to describe religious practices in somewhat different terms.”⁷⁴

What the doing does is our first glimpse into the future of religious studies. It offers us an opportunity to establish common ground, regardless of the abstract discrepancies between scholars belonging to different religious studies traditions. It gives us an understanding of what religious studies can look like when we work toward the goal of creating cumulative knowledge.

By focusing on *what the doing does* in a very broad sense...the scholar can seek to put forward a perspective on which certain normative questions bear without entering into debates over what a religious practice *means*. Doing so extricates one from the business of determining which interpretations of religious practice are “really real.”⁷⁵

The problem is clear: religious studies has not embraced *the spirit of modern science*. It has not yet recognized that in order to ensure the survival of the field in 21st-century academia, it is imperative to engineer an approach to the study of religion that reflects *the spirit of modern science* despite the complexity of the science-religion relation. Failures of modern scholars to build upon older scholarship by refining and revising theories with legitimate claims to model accuracy have even led modern social scientists, many of whom have enjoyed success similar to

⁷⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 95.

that of the natural scientists, to suggest that, “If the study of religion were more consistently deliberate in bringing together the realm of facts with the world of values, then it would be harder to imagine where the objections to scientific studies would lie.”⁷⁶ This work, therefore, maintains that stagnation in the field is symptomatic of an anxiety on the part of religious studies scholars to be ‘deliberate in bringing together the realm of facts with the world of values.’ That hesitance can be linked to an academic culture of especially stringent criticism of work pertaining to theology—especially by natural scientists—as well as inherent limitations perhaps best expressed by William James, who rightly said, “The science of religions would forever have to confess, as every science confesses, that the subtlety of nature flies beyond it, and that its formulas are but approximations.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, as demonstrated by the emergence of antireductionist thought, religious theorists are plagued by an intra-disciplinary tendency to dismiss claims made by thinkers with competing views of religion, and that tendency has become deeply embedded in religious studies scholarship such that truly productive dialogue even within the field itself is scant.

This discussion can be seen as a final attempt to fully embrace the idea that a science of religion can exist, and it looks with admitted pessimism on the future of a religious studies that cannot organize itself to adopt a unified, scientific approach to the study of religion. It also supposes that in order for that to happen, scholars in the field need to be willing to abandon their propensity for contrarian argument and methodological squabbling. By briefly de-constructing the historical circumstances of the birth of religious studies, we can catch a glimpse of the intellectual culture that has led to the academic stagnation we observe today. And by offering a

⁷⁶ Robert Wuthnow, “Is There a Place for ‘Scientific’ Studies of Religion?”, B10.

⁷⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 456.

proposed model for the application of disjunctive theories of religion to living, breathing issues in science, this work has demonstrated value in the set of analytical tools that a reorganized, revitalized religious studies offers its followers.

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