



## REVIEW ESSAY

# Religion, Reductionism, and the Seduction of Epistemology

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After the publication of *Religion and Reductionism* it should no longer be possible, in principle at least, to employ the term 'reductionism' in the cavalier manner favored by advocates of theological and para-theological approaches to study of religion\*. Indeed, some of the essays—particularly Thomas Ryba's demanding but rewarding 'Are religious theories susceptible to reduction?'—provide a much needed guide to the discussions taking place in the philosophy of science, discussions which are generally overlooked in the controversies, both written and oral, in which scholars of religion engage. Since many, or perhaps most, of these oral exchanges amount merely to the reflex-like condemnation of a theoretical position or methodological approach whose characteristics are supposedly understood by everyone, one would hope that by showing that one can be a reductionist by reducing religion to social processes, but also by reducing it to the experiencing of 'the sacred', this collection will put an end to those reflexes [both critics and admirers of that anti-reductionist champion, Mircea Eliade, will be surprised to find him classified as a reductionist by replacement (pp. 101–12), but also of being guilty of anti-reductionist eliminativism (53)].

But one should not be so optimistic (or naive) to believe that elegant reasoning or copious footnotes will change many minds (assuming, of course, that those minds will spend the time necessary to acquaint themselves with the reasoning and with the relevant literature): what is worth studying about theological and non-theological approaches to religion is the fact that they seem to be condemned to function as competing metalanguages—eternally condemned, as it were, to try to account for and to subsume the rival discourse. Therefore, Lorne Dawson's complaint that 'debates over reductionism in religious studies often read like feuds between 'straw men'', and that the 'participants to these debates fail to take due advantages of theoretical developments in the social sciences' (144), fails itself to take into consideration the fact that these debates seem to require constructing straw men as well as disregarding or misreading the literature on the subject. This is an issue that deserves more extended treatment and to which I expect to return in a future publication.

A dimension of the discussion about reductionism that is likewise generally disregarded in this volume (and elsewhere) is the political one. Are the controversies about a *sui generis* or 'reducible' religion simply the result of competing philosophical attitudes, or should one place these debates in larger cultural and political contexts?<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, neither this issue, nor the fact that the debate about reductionism seems to flourish precisely in North America are subject to the exercise in reflexivity—or metareflexivity—that would seem to be required. There is a mention of the political aspect of this problem in Daniel Merkur 'Reflections of a working historian'; however,

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\* Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (eds), *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal and the Challenge of the Social Sciences in the Study of Religion*, Leiden, Brill, 1994. viii + 238 pp. \$71.50, ISBN 90 04 09870 4.

Merkur's remarks about 'the sort of occult viewpoint that we might expect of a former Iron Guardian' (i.e. Eliade) (p. 255) are more cryptic than illuminating.

As is to be expected in a collection of this nature, the 16 essays that comprise the volume set out to explore this cluster of issues from various perspectives and with varying degrees of success. In the introductory chapter, Robert Segal returns to the issues he has explored in a number of publications. Those who are familiar with his articles, beginning with 'In defense of reductionism' (1983), many of which have been collected in two volumes (Segal, 1989, 1992), will encounter a typically terse restatement of his position: non-reductionist approaches are inferior to reductionist ones; explanations are not necessarily reductive, and, conversely, interpretations are not necessarily non-reductive; to assume that there is something like the 'religiousness' or religion is as unwarranted as taking for granted the 'literariness' of literature; to fend-off social scientists, religionists have moved from denying the relevance of the social sciences for the study of religion to embracing anthropologists and sociologists such as Turner, Geertz, Douglas, Bellah, and Berger, among others. While it is difficult not to admire Segal's merciless scrutiny of theological and crypto-theological approaches to religion as well as his spirited defense of reductionism, one finds oneself asking, along with several of the contributors to *Religion and Reductionism*, whether the reductionism postulated and defended by Segal is ever going to descend from its Platonic heights and assume a form, any form. Indeed, the question one eagerly asks is the following: what is religion to be reduced to? To social, psychological, neurological, biological, chemical, physical processes and structures? What kind of life would one live or want to live after carrying to their logical conclusion any given reductionist approach? As Thomas Idinopulos wisely observes (in a chapter with whose premises I otherwise disagree), 'If we are to accept Segal's argument that reductionism is a 'superior' mode of analyzing religion, we need to know something about the kind of new and more authentic human life that results from that analysis' (81).

Now, in order to develop his position Segal does refer to arch-reductionists, such as Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, who have indeed proposed visions of human life. He argues, for instance, that Marx 'deems religion dysfunctional because he deems it false, but he does not deem religion false because he deems it dysfunctional' (11). But is this claim warranted by Marx's approach to religion? Is it the case that Marx is, like Segal, concerned only with epistemological issues—with whether religion is true or false—or is it the case rather that Marx is compelled to subject religion to his critique because religion, 'as an *inverted consciousness of the world*', as 'the *fantastic realization of human essence*' (Marx 1844/1994, p. 28), would be dysfunctional in terms of fulfilling his vision about communism, that is, the true realization of human essence? After all, in the second of the so-called 'Theses on Feuerbach' Marx writes, 'The question whether human thinking can reach objective truth—is not a question of theory but a *practical question*' (Marx, 1845/1994, p. 99). To be sure, neither Segal's essay nor mine is about Marx; nevertheless, I think that Marx's critique of Feuerbach points to the core of what is problematic with most of the contributions to *Religion and Reductionism*, and, in general, with this entire discussion: its disembodied character, the fact, to paraphrase the First Thesis on Feuerbach, that religion 'is conceived only in the form of the *object of perception*, but not as *sensuous human activity*'. Segal's epistemological—one would be tempted to say theological—concerns, which he shares with the majority of the contributors to this volume, lead him, and them, to neglect the materiality and the ritual aspect of religion—religion as *practical*, human-sensuous activity' (Thesis 5). Thus, on p. 6 he writes: 'Who would deny that self-professed believers offer prayers and sacrifices

*because they believe in god?* Is it the case, however, that the concept of belief is as unproblematic as Segal seems to imply? Why, indeed, do 'self-professed believers offer prayers and sacrifices'? Is it because they have come to the considered conclusion that there is a god with whom they should establish a specific kind of relationship? No doubt, such an explanation would do justice to the behavior of many religious people now as well as in previous generations; but one could very well reverse the chain of reasoning and argue that it is because people have been trained to pray and make offerings, and move their bodies in peculiar ways, that they have come to believe, although mostly in a semi-propositional manner, in their gods. The complex give and take between unspoken assumptions and religious behavior, between ritual activity and belief, and among bodily practices,<sup>2</sup> feelings and religious representations are ignored due to the relentless intellectual bent of most of the contributions.<sup>3</sup> It is true that Terry Godlove has addressed this issue in 'The instability of religious belief: some reductionist and eliminative approaches'; but in this case also, in approaching religious experience and its relation to belief, the author does not pay enough attention to the activities of those who believe *x* or *y*. If, unlike Godlove, one were to pay attention to what happens to the bodies of those who '*step over the threshold to the altar*', we would be less concerned with what they believe about the continuous or discontinuous character of that space (p. 58), than with the changes in their posture, movements and facial expression, and with the significance of those changes. It is an indication of the character of these discussions that instead of referring to a particular belief, or to a particular set of ritual actions, Godlove is content with remaining at the metatheoretical level and referring only to the theories advanced by Staal, Bell, Smith, Lawson and McCauley.<sup>4</sup>

In 'Human reflexivity and the non-reductive explanation of religious action', Lorne Dawson is concerned not with the problem of reductionism, which he, in effect, places outside the boundaries of what can be meaningfully discussed, but rather with the rationality of religious actions. After an infinitely subtle, if perhaps not altogether necessary, discussion of theories of rationality and explanation, he focuses on the assessment of 'the relative rationality of a religious believer's actions', 'by discerning the degree of reflexivity displayed by the believer with regard to his or her actions' (pp. 159–60). Using C Wright Mills' 'Situated actions and vocabularies of motive', he comes to the conclusion that 'religious talk is distinguished by some conceptual reference to a culturally transcendent order or dimension' (p. 160);<sup>5</sup> to those who would question not the 'reality' but 'the rationality of accepting the reality of the culturally postulated transcendent', he responds that 'such questions carry us beyond the methodologically warranted bounds of the social scientific study of religion and into metaphysics or morality' (p. 160).<sup>6</sup> It would seem, then, that, according to Dawson, as long as one exercises a modicum of reflexivity one can believe in whatever one wishes and act accordingly (a similar kind of reasoning can be found in Godlove's 'sociological argument' for the existence of God, a perverse exercise in crypto-theology<sup>7</sup>). An openly theological position, on the other hand, can be found in Tony Edwards' 'Religion, explanation, and the askesis of inquiry'. In the postmodern way that is becoming increasingly common these days—one which seems to have transformed the old-fashioned hermeneutical charity principle into a universal compassion which warmly allows, indeed celebrates everything, especially people's self-understanding—Edwards is also concerned with defending people's self description against the disrespect, offensiveness and bad feeling which seem to be present in any act of redescription (pp. 170–1, 178). Unlike Dawson, however, Edwards is not interested

in the role that reflexivity may play in somehow validating one's self-description; what seems to concern him—along with Richard Rorty, one of whose stupefying 'insights' is quoted on p. 170—is merely the need to protect at all costs people's self-understanding.

The one contributor who has moved beyond the narrow concern with epistemological issues, and with the ultimately theological concern with the truth or falsity of religion, is Ivan Strenski. In 'Reductionism without tears' he maintains that Segal's 'biggest mistake is to have taken up with the agenda dictated by the anti-reductionists in the first place' (p. 96) and asks, in an appropriately impatient tone, 'Why not simply dump the entire agenda of theological discussion of reduction?' (p. 97). One cannot but agree with Strenski when he asks that in discussing disciplinary autonomy one pay attention to the realities of academic politics, funding and the like [on this issue he is supported by Donald Wiebe, who in his 'Postscript: on method, metaphysics and reductionism' attacks what he calls Daniel Pals' (disciplinary) essentialism (p. 124)]. On the other hand, Strenski's rather hurried treatment of all that is gained when one for example focuses on the 'religious'—as different from, say, the 'political'—aspect of shi'a martyrdom (p. 106), should be supplemented with Ryba's nuanced discussion of the epistemological vs. ontological relationship between basic and special sciences (pp. 34–35), a discussion that has the advantage of considering the issue of hierarchies of explanation. Given the limited space at my disposal, I shall add that Daniel Pals devotes his essay to showing how the distinctions made by Segal are not as clear-cut as he would want them to be (for Pals' own position one should refer to his articles), and that William Padden offers an illuminating treatment of Durkheim's non-theological understanding of 'the sacred'.

Besides the already-mentioned disregard for religious activity and for the physical aspects of religion, a cause for concern is the narrow geographic and linguistic limits imposed to the discussion. By this I do not refer to the fact that only scholars working at the time in Canada and the United States were invited to participate in the conference that resulted in this volume—logistic, budgetary and other reasons make such limitations unavoidable and perhaps even desirable. What I mean is that even when their positions parallel those of the contributors to the volume, reference to the contributions of scholars who do not work in either the United States or Canada are almost entirely absent (Merkur mentions in passing 'Scandinavian, Italian and Israeli historians of religion' (p. 225), but then switches, *staccato*-like, to a discussion of Weber's ideal types). This is not the place to review the debates about the *sui generis* nature of religion, the role of explanation and understanding and related issues that take place outside the upper part of the northern portion of the western hemisphere; nonetheless, it may be worth pointing out that the unashamedly theological position defended for example by Carl Keller, for whom the 'science des religions est une sort de théologie fondamentale',<sup>8</sup> has something in common with the somewhat more restrained—or more 'qualified'—ones proposed in several of the essays in *Religion and Reductionism*; or that Dawson's 'open-ended', and therefore 'epistemologically more responsible policy' towards the transcendent (Dawson 1987, pp. 238, 242), has much in common with Peter Antes', Rainer Flasche's and also Keller's approaches. Antes maintains that 'The conclusions obtained from an anthropological approach . . . may not exclude the truths offered by traditional answers';<sup>9</sup> according to Flasche, the *Religionswissenschaft* has to concern itself with the 'Selbstverständnis der Gläubigen', as well as with a 'total andersartige Wirklichkeit';<sup>10</sup> finally Keller proposes 'l'acceptation méthodolique' 'de l'existence des partenaires 'autres' de l'homme' (Keller 1988, p. 157). It is also necessary to mention

that disregard for scholarship in languages other than English (or produced outside the English-speaking world) leads Strenski to write that 'news about the *religious* dimension of the Iranian revolution was delivered by scholars from departments of political science or history, when students of religion should have been in the forefront' (p. 107): in fact, students of religion, although not necessarily those belonging to the American Academy of Religion, were among the first to explore these issues, among them Hans Kippenberg (1981) and Jan Hjärpe (1982, in English). The important question, however, is whether one can afford to engage in these debates without taking into consideration the contributions by, among others, Bianchi,<sup>11</sup> Cancik, Gladigow,<sup>12</sup> Kippenberg,<sup>13</sup> Rudolph,<sup>14</sup> Seiwert<sup>15</sup> or Waardenburg<sup>16</sup>—scholars who deal, or have dealt, with methodological issues, but also with specific cultural developments in Greek and Roman religions, ancient and contemporary Gnosticism, Judaism, Islam, and Chinese religions.

Perhaps what we need now is a companion volume to *Religion and Reductionism*: a collection of essays, perhaps by the same authors, in which the virtues of reductionist, non-reductionist and 'qualified' approaches would be tested. In his valuable and unfairly neglected *Spiegare o comprendere la religione?*, Aldo Terrin, after discussing some of the issues the contributors to *Religion and Reductionism* are concerned with, examines (not unlike P. McGinty, *Interpretation and Dionysos*) various interpretations of the god Dionysos.<sup>17</sup> Would it not be an exhilarating intellectual experience to descend from the realm of metatheory in order to read a number of studies about beliefs and practices of specific groups at a given historical period, written in a manner that foregrounds the researcher's theoretical position or methodological approach?

## Notes

- 1 For an attempt in this direction see Benavides 1995.
- 2 On this issue one should consult Connerton 1989 as well as Bloch 1974.
- 3 I have already made this point in my review of Segal's *Explaining and Interpreting Religion*, which appeared in *Christian Century*, 13–20 July, 1994, 297–8. It may be worth pointing out that last sentence of the review I sent to the journal read as follows: '[the investigation of the connection between ritual and belief] would move us from the purely epistemological terrain to one which may lead to cooperation among students of religion, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists'. The printed version reads: '. . . cooperation between *theologians*, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists' (emphasis added).
- 4 In making his argument Godlove agrees with the theologian Robert Wilken about the need not to 'narrow the circle of people we will talk to' (p. 56), and thereby disregards Ryba's lucid point (made not against Godlove but against Segal!) about the fallacy of *ad populum* arguments (p. 36).
- 5 See also Dawson 1987.
- 6 Dawson's position is similar to the one advanced most recently by Clarke and Byrne who accuse Durkheim of making 'a *metaphysical* choice' when denying the existence of a non-mundane reality; see Clarke and Byrne 1993, p. 171.
- 7 See Godlove 1989, pp. 195–6.
- 8 Keller 1988, p. 160; Keller concludes his article as follows: '. . . Car le chrétien a de fortes raisons de penser—et de le dire courageusement—que tous les mystères de l'Ultime s'éclairent à la lumière de Jésus-Christ'.
- 9 Antes, 1979a, p. 282 (English Summary); on the same page he writes: '. . . müssen allen Aussagen so formuliert werden, das die Wahrheit bestimmter Antworten nicht generell—sozusagen *ex officio*—abgelehnt wird. Religionswissenschaftliche Forschung mus sich diebezüglich *neutral* und *offen* zugleich verhalten'. See also Antes 1978, 1979b, 1986.
- 10 See Flasche 1981, esp. pp. 229, 231.
- 11 See, among many other contributions, Bianchi 1970, 1972, 1974, 1975/76. Bianchi's position is similar to the one proposed in Saler 1993.

- 12 See Cancik's and Gladigow's contributions to Cancik, Gladigow and Laubscher (eds), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (of which three volumes have already been published). Unlike *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, published under the general editorship of Mircea Eliade, this is a *Handbuch* of basic concepts in the study of religion and does not include entries on religious history. This important publication does not seem to have had any impact in English-speaking countries.
- 13 See Kippenberg 1983.
- 14 Rudolph 1962 and the essays reprinted in 1992.
- 15 See Seiwert 1977; at the conclusion of this article Seiwert writes: 'Die Religionswissenschaft hat zu sehr versucht, ihre Andersartigkeit und Sonderstellung zu betonen, anstatt sich auf die gemeinsame Basis aller empirischen Wissenschaften zu besinnen: Rationalität und Überprüfbarkeit der Aussagen'. Particularly important is Seiwert 1981.
- 16 See Waardenburg 1984.
- 17 See Terrin 1983; it is a pity that this book is not available in translation.

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