

Critical Episodes in the Emergence and Development of the Scientific Study of Religion

A SUMMARY STATEMENT:

Preliminary Comment:

There is general agreement that by the late Paleolithic period the cognitive capacities of *Homo sapiens* match those of behaviorally modern human beings. Our Paleolithic forebears, that is, were mentally capable of engaging in a scientific mode of thought, but they clearly did not “discover/create” science. Their mode of reflective thought (rather than practical thinking in engaging the world in solving their everyday survival objectives) is reasonably labeled “mythopoetic” rather than scientific because, as Alexander Rosenberg it, it is a mode of thought that is best as driven “to force events into the mold of a story with a plot” (2011, 14; something he thinks is “practically hardwired into our brain” [14]). Accounting for the emergence of a scientific mode of thought, therefore, will require understanding the social, economic, and political conditions in which scientific thinking actually – historically – emerged and is clearly not hardwired into the human brain. As Rosenberg notes: “Understanding the sciences is a challenge because of the way science packages its discoveries. Our brain didn’t evolve to be able to unwrap the package easily” (4; see also Wolpert, McCauley).

“Lecture #1 : *The Pre-Socratic Revolution in Thought Makes the Scientific Study of Religious Thought and Behavior Possible*

What made scientific study of the natural world possible is what also made scientific thought about anything possible. The early Pre-Socratic cosmologists took the first step in the direction of a scientific cosmology in seeking an explanation of the physical world in which they lived by limiting their search to the fundamental substance or substances from which it emerged and understandable processes of transformation of that substance or substances. They relied neither on mythopoetic (or revelational) accounts of the universe or mere intuition. Rather, they based their accounts of the world/cosmos on reason and empirical evidence. In doing so, they in effect created a new cultural value: “knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone,” which is a fundamental step out of a mythopoetic mindset in which, as Ernest Gellner puts it, the community’s cognitive base line is at the same time the framework of the social and moral order. Investigation of natural phenomena in traditional societies is one among many activities and is pursued in that context, as Floris Cohen points out, “in the framework of a larger conception of how things in the universe cohere” (xxxx, 506).

Such knowledge was capable of being put into the form of propositional claims about the cosmos – about states of affairs in the world – that were open to criticism and testing against empirical observation. They were not beholden to traditional authority, but only to (“unbridled”) reason and evidential appraisal. The search for causes (substances and processes of transformation of the substances) supplanted agentic explanations so that not only were the stories of the gods not sources of knowledge but the “gods” themselves became objects of explanation).

In addition to such critique of the gods (i.e., as objects of rational examination; e.g., Euhemerus) a kind of comparative analysis of diverse religious traditions also emerged in thinkers like Herodotus.

Lecture #2: Aristotle's Belated Contribution to the Scientific Study of Religious Thought and Behavior

Socrates was not interested in the project of the ancient Greek cosmologists; nor did he claim that it was either an unreasonable intellectual program or provide a critical response to it. Socrates rejected it because he thought it had no meaning with respect to human existential concerns. Reason, for Socrates, was put to better use in the service of achieving a fulfilled human existence which could only be achieved in the soul's release from the body and returning to its "natural" state – its original home. In this sense Socrates "bridled" reason – espousing it only in connection with a particular goal – and consequently replaced the autonomous reason of the ancient Greek cosmologists with what has come to be known as "right reason." Plato constructs a systematic metaphysical structure that elaborates Socrates's "insight" using some of the elements of the thought of the ancient Greek cosmologists in attempt to give it epistemic credibility. Plato in effect, that is, creates what can reasonably be called a "hybrid" mode of thought combines the autonomous reason of the cosmologists that aims simply at seeking (disinterested/objective) knowledge of the world, a non-objectively knowable path of "salvation" from the world.

Aristotle rejects much of the Platonic system and picks up the agenda of knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone and its commitment to the autonomy of reason and openness to testability of knowledge claims. Aristotle's influence is very limited in the Hellenistic period – "scientific" interests decline in what E. R. Dodds has called "an age of anxiety" produced in the aftermath of Alexander's death. Philosophies devoted to existential concerns flourish, and the synthesis of Platonic and Christian thought become dominant. However, the re-introduction of Aristotle's works into European thought in the eleventh and twelfth centuries also brings the ancient Greek notion of the knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone (along with the notion of the autonomy of reason) back into play. This is particularly visible in Abelard's contribution to the emergence of theology as an academic discipline. This again amounts to the creation of a "hybrid" mode of thought in that it attempts to "scientize" religious thought. This however differs from the "hybrid" mode of thought created by Plato in which Plato introduces mythopoetic elements into the intellectual framework created by the ancient Greek cosmologists and thereby "bridling" autonomous reason. Abelard, contrariwise, introduces autonomous reason as an element of academic theology and thereby opens theology to criticism from outside its mythic framework. Abelard's innovation did not take root immediately; Thomas Aquinas, for example, "re-bridled" reason not by mixing it with mythopoetic elements but rather by subordinating its ultimate conclusions to what he called the "preambles of faith." In the long run, however, the reintroduction of autonomous reason into the intellectual framework of the Medieval period eventually made possible the critique of religion and the possibility of new avenues for "understanding/explaining" religions.

Lecture #3: *“The Age of Discovery and Its Import for the Comparative Study of Religions”*

There was a very limited – fourfold – taxonomy of religions in the Middle Ages: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Pagan religions. This was a period of Christian dominance with the authorities engaged in justifying pagan religions and in, later, producing apologies for Christianity. This taxonomy changed from the early years of the fifteenth century through the seventeenth century with the increasing information about other religions in this “age of discovery.” As one author put it: these discoveries “altered the tenor of life in Europe ... [in that] [e]very thinker was confronted by new facts and new mysteries ... [involving] great revisions of science and belief” (Clark 1954, 73-74). Social conditions with the internal tensions within Christianity gave an impetus to an agenda for toleration. The new information about other religions aided in the development of implicit critiques of religion which also laid groundwork for achieving a more generous understanding of religion in general and therefore toleration of a plurality of religions. And, as Hunt, Jacob, and Mijnhardt (eds) argue in their *“The Book that Changed Europe”* (2010) put it, the toleration of religious difference would have “cast a ‘profane’ and secular light” on religion, allowing one to gain some distance from it and thereby permitting a somewhat objective view of religion. This development was essential to the possibility of the emergence of a scientific study of religion in Europe.

Lecture #4: *“The Age of Reason and the Ascendancy of Scientific Philology”*

This lecture focused on the limited role played by the Renaissance in making possible the emergence of a scientific study of religion. It was still tied to a myth of the waning vitality of the cosmos and looked to the past for what was good and right. It looked backward rather than forward to what was possible and therefore tied knowledge to the authority of what had already been achieved. The Renaissance was not altogether without a critical attitude but it was the Radical Enlightenment that created an “a culture of criticism” that disenchanting the world and contributed to a growing secularity by weakening religious institutions by way of accommodation made with the new mode of reasoning. There was, in a sense, a recovery of nerve – keeping in mind the failure of nerve in keeping to the Pre-Socratic epistemic agenda – in moving beyond the fatalism that characterized the Medieval world and the servile subordination to traditional authorities in the Renaissance. The Scientific Revolution, of course, placed the greatest evidence on reason and observation in the search for knowledge, although it seems that its initial emergence was dependent on restricting itself entirely to investigating and explaining natural (physical) phenomena. But as Samuel Preus (xxxx) and Guy Stroumsa (xxxx) have shown, this “unbridled” reason was soon applied in the biblical criticism of Baruch Spinoza which in effect laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of the scientific study of religion. As Preus put it: “Although it was not his intention, he [Spinoza] laid the foundation for what is now an established academic discipline that applies the same historical, critical, and comparative method to the explanation and interpretation of scripture and biblical religions as one applies to any other religious text or system” (208) and Stroumsa follows with the claim “that the study of the Bible was central to the birth of comparative religion in early modernity” (xxxx, 4)..

Lecture #5: *From Romanticism to Postmodernism: The Triumph of the Failure of Nerve*

Romanticism emerged in reaction to the disenchantment of the world created by the Scientific Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment. The “science and enlightenment” model of the world, it was felt by many, landed humanity in a psychic wasteland because, as one scholar put it, it left the personal, holistic dimension of the human person in a problematic condition (Marty 1985, 8). Science had taken apart the world, understanding elements and aspects of it but without an understanding of it overall and humanity’s place in it. Science, that is, as Ernest Gellner put it, failed “to legitimate social arrangements, and to make men feel at home in the world...” (1992, 60). As critics put it: reason could explain everything and understand nothing. Tim Blanning quotes Coleridge on the problem as follows: scientists will believe “any absurdity rather than believe the grandest truths, if they have not the teaching of their own senses in their favour” (2010, 27). Because of this opposition of Romanticism to what might for brevity’s sake be called the Enlightenment Model of the world, Arthur Herman sees the Romantics as Plato’s step-children writing: “Man’s senses, which Plato treated as sources of error and Locke the sources of useful knowledge, were transformed by Romantic artists and poets into the sources of divine truth” (2013, 411). For the Romantics, nature itself embodied divine truths which could be perceived in feeling a connectedness to it which was the special aptitude of poets who therefore, as Herman puts it, were the living intermediaries between humankind and eternal (Platonic) truths. Their poetry sprang “from a realm of intuitive feeling ‘beyond the control of the active powers of the mind’” and reflected a transcendent reality (Herman 2013, 423).

At a more reflective intellectual level, Blanning points out, postmodernism is simply a continuation of the complaints of the Romantics against the Scientific Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment. They too belong to the culture of feeling created by the Romantics but they are in many ways much more extreme. As Gellner points out, they deny that knowledge beyond the constraints of culture is possible and therefore maintain that all cultures are, epistemically speaking, equals. Postmodernism, that is, sees the scientific account of the world as simply alternative to other types of “discourse” about the world – as much shaped by culture as any other.

Romanticism and Postmodernism in re-mythologizing knowledge, and especially so in biblical studies where hermeneutics and phenomenology overlaid the historical and philological approach with concern for the religious/moral meaning of the text. And this, according to Guy Stroumsa, brought the scientific study of religion to an end (2010, 164).

Lecture #6: *New Expectations for the Study of Religion in the Modern Research University?*

Postmodernism has had a massive influence on the academic world for nearly a half century, and it has radically challenged the scientific focus of the modern research university. It has not done this by refuting science – showing that the sciences have not in fact achieved a cumulative knowledge of states of affairs in the world – or providing clear argument or evidence that there is no difference in the epistemic character between modern and archaic societies (between the “savage and the modern mind,” as Ernest Gellner puts it). This difference – the existence in the

modern world of transcultural and amoral knowledge of states of affairs in the world – is, as Gellner points out, a major and crucial discontinuity in the intellectual history of humankind. Yet Postmodernists have ignored this discontinuity and simply relied on assertions to the contrary wrapped in profoundly obscure musings about meaning. Gellner captures well the nature of this discourse when he writes: “The [postmodern] investigator demonstrates both his initiation into the mysteries of hermeneutics, the difficulty of the enterprise, by complex and convoluted prose, peppered with allusions to a high proportion of the authors of the World’s Great Books, and also to the latest fashionable scribes of the Left Bank” (1992, 30). The Humanities are especially afflicted with this development but so have the social sciences and even the natural sciences. In anthropology, Gellner points out for example, postmodernism’s influence “means in effect the abandonment of any serious attempt to give a reasonably precise, documented and testable account of anything” (29). In the study of religions it has meant a similar flight from seeking to make testable propositional claims about religious thought and behavior, opting instead for getting to the depth meaning of religious behaviors the mysterious techniques of hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches to “understanding” rather than explaining “religion.” The Sokal Hoax shows that even physics (and the other natural sciences) are not immune to postmodern explications of the anti-empiricist dogmas, as John Zammito calls them (2004), namely the issues of theory-laden observation, underdetermination of theory, and incommensurability of concepts in theory change. These claims he shows are hyperbole, and even though something has been learned in taking these “‘theoretical’ extravagances” seriously, they have been deflated, indicating the need for a more moderate historicism than postmodernism has peddled. Zammito, as advertisement for his book rightly claims, has seriously undermined “the [so-called] discipline of postmodern science studies.”