



Religious Literacy and Our Pre-Critical Past¹

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Abstract

Using the recent emphasis on teaching religious literacy as an example, the paper argues that, despite seeming advances over the past few generations, the academic study of religion continues to employ problematic methods and terminology, indicative of unresolved theoretical issues that remain at the heart of this scholarly exercise.

Keywords

Critical religion; Interreligious dialogue; North American Association for the Study of Religion; Phenomenology of religion; Religious literacy; World religions paradigm

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When invited to deliver a paper to the 2019 meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) on the topic of the history of the field, I accepted, though with some small degree of trepidation; for I felt the need to say something a little different from what I've already put into print, on a variety of past occasions, concerning what I consider to be continuing problems in the history of the study of religion. To state it simply, my argument has been that, given my understanding of the requirements for studying human beings from within the modern research university, some of the approaches adopted by scholars of religion are more fitting than others. In fact, as I've also argued, some of the approaches adopted by our colleagues actually undermine the field, at least as I understand it to be properly constituted, despite being offered by their supporters as but

¹ A much longer version of this paper is included as the opening chapter to McCutcheon 2021. I want to thank Tomáš Bubík, the editor of *e-Rhizome*, for interest in publishing this brief version.

one more viable alternative. Case in point: I contest the position that holds that virtually any use of the word ‘religion’ in a post-secondary setting, or as part of a piece of research, qualifies as but another instance of the so-called big tent that some think that scholars all inhabit. As with how I discuss definitions in my own introductory classes, then, when it comes to an academic pursuit I would argue that what some now see as the admirable desire to include as much as possible (often accomplished by means of what, on a past occasion, I characterized as the virtually limitless ‘religion and ...’ genre) actually hampers the field; instead, when it comes to scholarship, the more precision the better.

So, having made plenty of such claims in the past, I felt that this occasion presented an opportunity to say something new. But, sadly, despite this desire, I decided in the end that I see little new to say when I look over some of the work that now characterizes large segments of our field, much of it coming from a newer generation of scholars; for, as I read such work, I find myself returning to many of the same old unresolved themes, since many of the problems that I find with past practices and the criticisms that I have offered on previous occasions strike me as being *just as relevant today*, when applied to the work that some consider to be at the field’s cutting edge.

Despite what some consider to be advances in the modern field—consider Daniel Dubuisson, for instance, in the opening sentence to his latest English book, celebrating “a veritable scientific revolution” taking place in the study of religion over the last two decades²—it seems to me that an effective and always ready rearguard action has undermined many of those gains by domesticating theory; for despite many scholars saying that they’ve read the critical work, by and large they continue to pursue their studies with colonial era tools in the pursuit of normalizing their own group’s self-interests.

Dubuisson’s conclusion that the results of what he describes as a revolution “are so considerable that one must here and now envisage new ways to think of the History of Religions” notwithstanding, many in the field today are instead falling back on lightly revised versions of long familiar (and, I argue, troublesome) approaches. I am therefore in strong agreement with Leslie Dorrough Smith when she recently noted that “although the field itself is now populated by scholars who ... claim a focus on more theories and methodological concerns, ... there is a widespread, uninterrogated, essentialist impulse still remaining in the research of many who claim theoretical savvy”.³ To put it in simple but still significant terms: it is remarkable just how many people in our field still routinely talk about those two supposed things that they call ‘the west’ and ‘the east’, or western as opposed to non-western religions (let alone still dividing things up between Christian and non-Christian religions); this is done despite all of us having apparently read (and understood?) Edward Said, who, readers may recall, argues in detail that such terms are

² Daniel Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religion*, trans. Martha Cunningham (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers, 2019), 1.

³ Leslie Dorrough Smith, “On the Grammar of Teaching Religious Studies,” unpublished paper presented to the annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, San Diego, CA (2019): 1.

socially formative and self-referential and are therefore *not* descriptive of actual regions, agents, mentalities or items at large in the world.⁴

I am hardly the first to observe such shortcomings, of course; for example, consider how Naomi Goldenberg (herself a onetime NAASR President and strong advocate for the governance role of the rhetoric of religion) has described this problem:

My department colleagues ... are a highly intelligent, accomplished group of religious studies scholars. They are familiar with the substantial body of critical scholarship in the discipline that, for the past two decades at least, has argued ... that ‘religion’ is a modern concept that operates as a distorting anachronism when applied to the study of earlier epochs ... [and] that ‘religion’ has roots in European colonial ambitions and intellectual history.... I do not expect my colleagues to refrain from disagreeing with some or even all of these general tenets of the sub-field of ‘critical religion’. Rather, what I find disconcerting is their choosing to ignore critical approaches to fundamental terms when they are describing religious studies as a discipline.⁵

As Ian Cuthbertson observes, in a reply to Goldenberg’s above-cited NAASR presentation:

Colleagues in the religious studies department where I teach will often listen attentively whenever I insist that religion is not a self-evident thing in the world and then shrug their shoulders and proceed with the serious academic business of studying various individuals, texts, and practices in an attempt to determine what these might reveal about religion as a coherent object of study or thing in the world.⁶

To elaborate on my thesis concerning what my onetime Alabama colleague, Emily Crews, has called “a rash of scholarship that operates blindly when considering ‘religion’, failing to parse the many layers of problematic meaning the category religion has accrued”⁷, what Matthew Baldwin, in an earlier NAASR paper of his own, characterizes as a “given ... that many of our colleagues do ignore and dismiss or minimize” what he also terms “critical scholarship on ‘religion’ as a category employed in human thought”⁸, as well as

⁴ That the discourse on ‘the east’ and ‘the west’ has practical results that run the gamut from what many would judge to be benign to grievous or even catastrophic, is, of course, something that I recognize (contrary to dismissive caricatures of my work); such a recognition, however, does not mean that one’s interest in studying discourse and its effects is diminished.

⁵ Naomi R. Goldenberg, “The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religions as Vestigial States,” in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, ed. Trevor Stack, Naomi Goldenberg and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 80.

⁶ Ian Alexander Cuthbertson, “Preaching to the Choir? Religious Studies and Religionization,” in *Method Today: Redescrining Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Brad Stoddard (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2018), 103.

⁷ Emily Crews, “Perhaps Action Enough,” in *Method Today: Redescrining Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Brad Stoddard (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2018), 117.

⁸ Matthew C. Baldwin, “Objects and Objections: Methodological Reflections on the Data for Religious Studies,” in *Construction “Data” in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie

what Craig Martin’s own recent NAASR paper describes as the sort of “cavalier dismissals” that cause him “anger and frustration”⁹ (sentiments shared by Touna in her own work¹⁰), let’s briefly examine the now popular linkage between the study of religion and advocating for increased religious literacy, seeing it as but one, exemplary site where well-known difficulties reappear.

While we could begin with Stephen Prothero’s 2008 book on this topic—whose marketing materials phrase the point of the book as follows:

‘We have a major civic problem on our hands’, says religion scholar Stephen Prothero. He makes the provocative case that to remedy this problem, we should return to teaching religion in the public schools. Alongside ‘reading, writing, and arithmetic’, religion ought to become the ‘Fourth R’ of American education.¹¹

—we could instead cite more recent instances, such as the American Academy of Religion’s recently completed three-year initiative (begun 2016 with a \$160,000 grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations) to “produce consensus guidelines on religious literacy that administrators and faculty nationwide can draw upon to help shape college curricula”.¹² Along with that project we could also draw attention to Harvard Divinity School’s current Religious Literacy Project, along with Diana Eck’s much earlier (begun in 1991) but not unrelated Pluralism Project, or even mention The Open University, in the UK, and its free online short course, “Why Religion Matters: Religious Literacy, Culture and Diversity”. In fact, we could even refer to the wide variety of Departments of Religious Studies throughout the US whose members now see the topic of religious literacy as a thematic engine capable of driving, to whatever extent, their programming initiatives, institutional identity, and thus success.

But just what is entailed in this widespread initiative? As phrased in a 2015 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, this turn toward teaching religious literacy recognizes the urgency to make our campuses successful models of communities of diversity and global

Dorrough Smith (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers, 2019), 7.

⁹ Craig Martin, “‘The Thing Itself Always Steals Away’: Scholars and the Constitution of Their Objects of Study,” in *Constructing “Data” in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers, 2019), 152.

¹⁰ Vaia Touna, “Scholars and the Framing of Objects,” in *Constructing “Data” in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers, 2019), 175.

¹¹ His interest in this topic continues, e.g., his 6 April 2018, public lecture, advertised as being on “Religious Literacy in an Age of Religious Nationalism” at the University of Kansas.

¹² At the public session I attended, near the start of the group’s project, many audience members were frustrated by the manner in which a Department of Religious Studies could be undermined by what then seemed like the committee’s interest in advocating acquiring knowledge about religions in almost any other disciplinary or course setting—a move that, or so some in the audience argued, could provide warrant for administrations not to support the work of scholars of religion. Ironically, perhaps, as one committee member responded on that occasion, the organization’s mission, to promote the public study of religion, does not necessarily require that it promote the academic field of Religious Studies.

citizenry that do not ignore but recognize—and draw on—the significance, beauty, and complexity of religion.¹³

That the just-quoted essay was written weeks after the November 2015 terrorist attacks across Paris and in the more immediate context of candlelight vigils held on the author's campus (University of Wisconsin at Madison)—attended, as he describes it in his opening paragraph, by students of a variety of faiths (as well as the religiously unaffiliated)—cannot go unnoticed; for the desire to arrive at a civil and inclusive public square (civil and inclusive as judged by specific and usually undisclosed and thereby naturalized standards, of course—*this* is the issue that needs attention) is the driving force behind the religious literacy initiative.¹⁴ Or, as the author, Rosenhagen—himself an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who also holds a Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg and who was the *Associate Director of the onetime Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions while now being the Director of the University of Wisconsin at Madison's onetime Center for Religion and Global Citizenry*—phrases it:

Colleges need to invest more in their students' religious literacy—not proselytizing, not affirming any particular faith—but simply teaching vital competence about religion and its impact on global affairs that will prepare students for their future while enlightening our civic discourse along the way. Footnote?

Or consider how Moore's Harvard project defines religious literacy:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:

- a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts
- the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.¹⁵

Not only do we see in this discourse on religious literacy a normative and uncritical notion of religion as a beneficial (i.e., peaceful, beautiful, and civil) force in human affairs, as well as a politically and theologically liberal understanding of diversity and inclusion

¹³ Ulrich Rosenhagen, "The Value of Teaching Religious Literacy," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 2015): <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Value-of-Teaching/234393> (accessed 16 September 2019).

¹⁴ In November of 2015, 130 people were killed and 494 people injured as part of attacks in the French capital, involved a bombing at a sports stadium and attacks on the streets, restaurants and a night club.

¹⁵ Quoted from <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy> (accessed September 15, 2019).

(something already addressed in *Critics Not Caretakers*, by the way¹⁶), but we also find traditional or what we might better call pre-critical notions of religion as a socio-politically autonomous force that is merely ‘shaped’ by history while ‘manifesting’ itself (or its various ‘dimensions’) in a variety of discrete locales; in this way, seemingly positive practical effects are said to be achieved by one or more of the so-called world religions or what are often termed faith traditions, effects enabled or promoted by our correct understanding of the religions...—*all of which flies in the face of a variety of critical gains made in the field over the past generation or two of scholars.*

First off, in an effort to recover some critical intelligence in our field, consider that suspicion from the political left (rightly, I would argue) usually greets the discourse on civility when it is wielded by those on the right of contemporary politics, for in such cases it is (again, rightly, I would argue) recognized to be a strategic way to promote *a certain sort of order* and thereby *to suppress resistance to it* (by ruling such resistance as being out of bounds, because it is ‘uncivil’). For example, consider the reaction by some to the recently founded program for civil public discourse at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, established by its Board of Governors—a board that is understood by some current UNC faculty to be at odds with the idea of shared faculty governance.¹⁷ The irony, however, is that when the same term, ‘civility’—which I assume *always* to be a rhetorical term with socially formative effects, regardless who uses it—is employed by those on the political left it is often left unscrutinized by them, as if it only now just means what it naturally says and is no longer the strategic front for other, undisclosed claims. The first problem, then, with religious literacy initiatives in our field is that I see little if any critical analysis of the links between these projects and claims that it somehow enhances some untheorized notion of civility.

What concerns me even more is the uncritical manner in which the discourse on world religions makes its reappearance by means of such initiatives. To name but a few examples that might have already come to the reader’s mind, the work of such scholars as Tim Fitzgerald¹⁸, Tomoko Masuzawa¹⁹ and Suzanne Owen²⁰, not to mention about half of the authors collected together in Cotter and Robertson’s edited volume, *After World*

¹⁶ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), chpt. 10.

¹⁷ See: <http://publicdiscourse.web.unc.edu/> or for a recent article on the program and faculty reactions, see: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/12/program-civic-virtue-unc-chapel-hill-raising-concerns-about-secrecy-and-funding> (accessed 12 September 2019).

¹⁸ Timothy Fitzgerald, “Hinduism and the ‘World Religion’ Fallacy,” *Religion* 20 (1990): 101–118.

¹⁹ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁰ Suzanne Owen, “The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (2011): 253–268.

*Religions*²¹)²²—work specifically on the manner in which the discourse on world religions not only was, from the start, intertwined with very specific colonial governance efforts but also on the ways in which it remains invested in a variety of modern political projects—strikes me as going completely unrecognized and thereby ignored in the religious literacy literature. What is fascinating in all this, then, is that, despite the critical work of these and other writers, and the way that their research on the links between categories, methods, and power politics has driven much of the conversation in the modern field, the main problem with the world religions discourse today, at least according to others also working in the field today, is apparently *that people do not know it, and thus use it, well enough*; in other words, the problem is *not* that scholars and the general public at large continue to divide the world into a number of so-called faith traditions (thereby perpetuating a sort of apolitical idealism and individualism, each of which have, or so some have argued, profound socio-political implications) but *that we all don't sufficiently know the descriptive ins and outs of each*.²³ Recall that among the goals of Harvard's religious literacy initiative is to enhance "a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions." What's more, if we add Fitzgerald, Masuzawa, Owen, et al.'s critique of the discourse on world religions to the work of those engaged in the wider critique of the category religion itself (the genus of which world religions could be said to be but a species), and its practical effects in modern liberal democracies, then we arrive at the curious moment when a critical portion of the field is working to historicize and thereby limit our attraction to naming something *as* religion or *as* a world religion while much of the rest of the field seems to be working to revive and secure an undefined notion of civil society by ensuring that the population can—to put it crassly, but in a manner in keeping with the goals of this initiative—properly distinguish a Sikh from a Muslim from a Hindu from a Jain from a . . . , all in hopes, I gather, that a deference to *certain sorts of differences* will become apparent to those sufficiently articulate in the use of this taxonomy.

And voila: what some of us see to be the critical gains made over the past decades in studying how the discourse on religion or on world religions helps to make certain sorts

²¹ Christopher R. Cotter, and David G. Robertson (eds.), *After World Religions Reconstructing Religious Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016).

²² I say this because, as elaborated in the Afterword that I wrote for the volume, about half of the contributors to the book are devoted to using the world religions category better (e.g., adding more traditions that have been, in the estimation of such scholars, inappropriately ignored in the past, such as pagan or indigenous traditions) while the other half wish to dispel with the category all together.

²³ While I agree that we ought to be careful in the description of other people's claims and actions (with a nod toward Wayne Proudfoot's once widely quoted criticism of what he termed descriptive reductionism, as opposed to his support for explanatory reductionism [1985: 196–197]), this agreement has not prevented me on a variety of occasions from also reminding scholars (with a nod to a point demonstrated long ago by reflexive anthropologists), that our very questions, assumptions, and categories frame the conversation in ways that often predetermine what our so-called informants or interlocutors say in reply to us (as I elaborate later in this paper); our nuanced or sensitive description of others' claims therefore does not prevent our (perhaps unwitting) determining of how others are understood in our work.

of social worlds possible and persuasive is lost in the effort to normalize but one of those very worlds.

While we might easily think of other recent developments in the field where a disciplinary past that some of us had thought we had left far behind turns out, upon closer inspection, to be far more current than we had thought,²⁴ the contradiction here between, on the one hand, the prominence of contemporary religious literacy initiatives, championed by some of the leading or most influential (or at least well-funded) aspects of the field and, on the other hand, critical scholars of religion who treat the study of religion as no different than the study of any other domain of human life, should cause us to pause and ask a few questions about just how modern this modern field of ours actually is. The colonial-era world religions discourse that many in our field think they've left far behind turns out to be as relevant as it ever was, whether or not world religions courses continue as the so-called bread and butter classes of Departments. (My assumption is that they still are, by the way—this would be an interesting study to tackle.)²⁵ What's more, the notion of religion as unique and irreducible—a stance associated by many with what many consider to be the now out-of-date though once prominent Chicago school of thought (though it was never just about Chicago, of course)—remains, I contend, as invigorated and consequential as ever, for it turns out to be the assumption that drives the use of the term religion in these literacy efforts; for, as in pollsters collecting voter data outside polling stations and thereby trying to determine how religious beliefs inform voting patterns (i.e., religious sentiments are presumed to be primary and thus causal), religion, belief, faith, experience, or any other of their analogues, are still generally assumed by such scholars to be a pre-social, non-political disposition that merely has political and social 'dimensions' and cultural 'expressions' (as per the Harvard Religious Literacy project, cited earlier). Here, as I've identified before, the etymology and modern uses of 'express' are both helpful to keep in mind, inasmuch as it connotes 'speaking one's mind' or putting something nonverbal 'into words'—thereby reproducing the common 'ghost in the machine' model of the human, whereby a dynamic, prior, and private inner consciousness and meaning is, by means of some secondary and invariably flawed step, said to be conveyed into the public by means of a symbol system that exists at a distance from the original intention ("That's not what I meant!" is sure evidence of this model, also making plain its agonistic role.) Thus, despite longstanding protests to the contrary, the old Cartesian dualism is, as alive as it ever was in the study of religion — something evident from the very beginning of another now popular subfield (i.e., studies of material religion), as in when one of its founders, Colleen McDannel (though we could easily quote the work of other influential

²⁴ The longer version of this paper examines recurring problems at such other sites as: those approaches known as material, lived, or embodied religion, as well as the notion of public religion and studies on religion and law.

²⁵ Studying the credit hour production that comes through such courses—among the key indicators, at least to university administrators, of a Department's vitality—along with obtaining sales information on the still thriving world religions textbook genre, would provide insight into this. On the enduring influence of Huston Smith's still in-print 1958 textbook, originally entitled *The Religions of Man* (including its unwavering sales over the years), see McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.*, 46.

figures, such as Robert Orsi), noted that her topic was “[t]he physical *expressions* of religion” and, in particular, “the material *dimension* of Christianity,” thereby prompting her research to have “ranged broadly over many *expressions* of material Christianity”²⁶.

Taking all of this into account suggests to me that, despite the ease with which many in the field now claim to have read the critical work and taken it into consideration, the field has actually changed very little in the past 150 years; for, citing but one scholar who has already been mentioned above, the distance on the one hand between Goldenberg’s critical approach to the category of religion as a tactical governance device of nation-states, whereby what she terms marginal, vestigial states are created and policed by dominant populations²⁷, and, on the other hand, contemporary religious literacy initiatives—which, by the way, Greg Alles has recently described as “not a particularly robust justification for the study of religions”²⁸ — is so great that the latter can be understood to be but one more data point in need of the former’s analysis.²⁹ If anything has changed at all, over this time, it is perhaps the political causes supported by the same old devices. I think here of the widespread notion of strategic essentialism and the manner in which a form of essentialism, hotly critiqued by scholars in many cases, can nonetheless be seen by some to be allowed or even embraced as long as it is in support of causes or interests which they support; or, as recently phrased by M Adryael Tong, in an article concerned with how scholars can “encounter the [historical] archive *on its own terms*”³⁰, “sometimes it is politically expedient—perhaps even necessary—to adopt essentialist language in order to effect one’s political goals” (43). That one’s adversaries are just as likely to adopt this technique, arguing just as vehemently for its legitimacy in helping them to achieve *their* practical goals by means of their scholarship and teaching, ought to be enough reason for scholars of religion to reconsider how to establish an institutional space where such work is excluded.

Before closing, I feel that I should be clear on the reason for offering the preceding critique. Although I may be incorrect, of course, I have the impression that some members of a younger generation, for whose work recent critical gains are important, have sometimes naturalized the contemporary place where they do their own work, thereby failing to recognize or appreciate that their institutional and disciplinary space is historically

²⁶ Collen McDannel, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 1–2, 276; emphases added.

²⁷ Naomi R. Goldenberg, “The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religions as Vestigial States,” in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, ed. Trevor Stack, Naomi Goldenberg and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 280–292.

²⁸ Gregory D. Alles, “Private Money and the Study of Religions: Problems, Perils, and Possibilities,” unpublished paper presented to the annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, San Diego, CA, 2019, 11.

²⁹ See the last chapter of McCutcheon 2003, “Religion and the Governable Self,” for an example of my own analysis of the political function of the category of religion—an approach certainly related to but by no means coterminous with Goldenberg’s approach.

³⁰ M Adryael Tong, “Categorization and its Discontents” in *Constructing “Data” in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishers, 2019), 40; emphasis added.

contingent, meaning that its establishment and maintenance was hard won, i.e., gained only by previous scholars tackling the work of their predecessors and peers in order to make plain how it was lacking or how it therefore led to a study of religion that was out of step with what they understood to be the usual requirements of scholarship. While I do not share Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe’s despair over what they described as their delusion about the field’s future as a scientific enterprise³¹—and although I do not share their narrow understanding of science—I admit to being concerned that without scholars at all career stages being willing to stand up and make strong statements about what they consider to be inadequate work in the field, the critical gains that some of us value will, within a surprisingly short time, be lost. For, as just argued, despite many of us apparently all agreeing that the world religions genre is an antiquated relic from a prior era, I would conjecture that it is now as vibrant and influential as it ever was—as is the version of the field that remains built upon it.

³¹ Luther H. 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): 587–597.

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