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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO THEISM

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24

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THEOLOGY

Alan G. Padgett

A chapter with this title might have two purposes, and thus differing fundamental questions, depending upon how we imagine the direction of relationship between the two main areas of theism on the one hand, and theology and religious studies on the other. We could wonder what theologians and other scholars of religion have made of the concept of "theism," and surrounding debates. In other words, we could look at theism carefully within the disciplines of theology and religious studies. This first way has, fortunately, already been covered for us in earlier chapters of this Companion, several of which, in discussing theism, already drew implicitly on the comparative theology of several religions and religious philosophies. This means they also drew upon the larger discipline of comparative religions. Because we can happily assume their work in this chapter, we do not have to follow the first way, the way which thinks about theism. Instead, we will follow the second way in this chapter. In other words, we will examine theology and religious studies from the point of view of theistic faith-and-reason. Thus our way in this chapter will be from theism to theology and religious studies. This journey necessarily raises some key questions, none of which have established answers among scholars, and all of which are vigorously debated by experts. What is religious studies? What is theology? Are they different branches of the same tree in the groves of Academe, or different species however related? Perhaps most controversially, what role does faith-based reasoning play in both—if any? To answer these questions, it will be necessary (however odd this might appear) to ponder what science is as an academic inquiry, and to consider briefly some broad themes in the methodology or rationality of the sciences. This is because to examine any academic discipline or science from the point of view of a robust religious faith is already to raise the issue of faith-and-reason, or if you like, a faith-based rationality within the sciences. After a very brief detour in this conflicted domain, we will then be able to examine more carefully theology and religious studies as academic disciplines in relation to theism, or perhaps better said, the role of theistic faith in both theology and religious studies.

What is a Science?

If only there was a simple (or even complex!) definition of science that scientists and scholars in science studies agreed upon, our first concern would be made much easier.

If only Karl Popper's definition, for example, or the later ones by Polanyi or Kuhn, had swept the field of opposition, we could simply assume it and move on (Popper 1959 [1935]; Polanyi 1958; Kuhn 1970). Alas, this is not the case. Items from all these thinkers are widely accepted, indeed, but a *definition* of science in the strict and demarcating sense has not been. Despite a great deal of first-class philosophical and historical research, no standard definition is to be had of either science *or* religion. *C'est la vie* or perhaps we should say, *c'est la philosophie*.

Fortunately for us, we don't really need to consider and resolve these current debates about what science is. Instead, we can rely on an older definition in English, one still current in most Continental languages such as French or German ("Science, n." 2010). In this older sense the English word "science" is not reduced to natural sciences, or even to the natural and social sciences. Rather, a science can be *any* serious and sustained academic inquiry, with an established body of knowledge that is open to a community of experts for review and critical examination based on reason and evidence, along with accepted methods for extending it with new proposals and discoveries. When I mean the word in this older sense, I will use the capital S. In this older sense, both philosophy and history are Sciences, for example, thus extending the range of meaning quite far relative to current American usage. This older definition is crucial to our discussion of the character and rise of religious studies, as we will see. I will use it frequently in this chapter.

The Rise of Religious Studies in Western Academia

In the long history of Western theology, religious studies is a rather recent phenomenon. Theology as an academic Science dates back to the founding of universities such as Oxford and Paris. By comparison, religious studies as a distinct branch of learning is a product of the late nineteenth century. What we mean by religious studies or comparative religion today was first formally advocated by the brilliant and influential professor F. Max Müller (1823–1900). For him the definition was straightforward: the Scientific study of all the religions of humanity, without prejudice toward any one of them. Hume had proposed already in the eighteenth century a "natural history" of religion (Hume 1757; see further Wheeler-Barclay 2010: 1–36). Müller's later proposal was for nothing less than a *Science* of religion that included critical historical work, which, like the science of language, is necessarily comparative and textual (Müller 1899 [1873]: 4–8). His work, along with others of his era, provided the historical origin of our concept of religious studies or comparative religion as an academic discipline (Capps 1995; Wheeler-Barclay 2010).

Müller himself tells us that the idea of a scientific study of religion did not originate with him; the history of religion as a Scientific study was taught in German universities when he was a student. Yet it did not cover the full range of religion as a human phenomenon: it referred only to the academic study of the religion of the Bible, i.e. of Jews and Christians (Müller 2002 [1870]: 353). In such academic courses on the history of religion, other religions were not even considered *religion*, but mere myth and superstition. Müller set about successfully to establish a new Science on a comparative, historical and global basis, one that would truly encompass all humankind. The idea of a scientific study of religion was quickly taken up by anthropologists and other social scientists and scholars (Capps 1995; Wheeler-Barclay 2010). Since the goal was to study all religions as a human phenomenon, common to every known culture, past and

present, this Science must be comparative. As such, it cannot favor any one religion, or at least it *should* not for truth's sake. No biases for or against religion, nor in favor of any religion, can be accepted into a Science of religion if it is to be truly Scientific. If bias and "preconceived theories, whether by the friends or enemies of religion" are allowed into the difficult and interdisciplinary Scientific study of religion, "the sense of truth, the very life of all science, is sacrificed, and serious mischief will follow without fail" (Müller 2002 [1870]: 102; see also Müller 1899 [1873]: 28). While Müller himself in his lectures sometimes showed a bias toward Christianity (e.g., Müller 1899 [1873]: 28), he was steady in his insistence that in "a comparative study of religions . . . Science wants no partisans" (ibid.). The basic principle of religious neutrality, that is, an absence of bias for or against any religion in this careful Science of religion, was established and quickly agreed upon by researchers in this new field. It is still part of the core Scientific values of this interdisciplinary and comparative academic study of religion as a human phenomenon. When the word "science" was reduced to the natural and social sciences, this human-focused Science was variously called history of religion, comparative religion, philosophy of religion, or simply religious studies (Capps 1995).

This raises a key question for any thoughtful theist: if a scholar of religion is a theist, might she bring her faith into the Scientific study of religion? Or is any particular religious faith excluded by a kind of methodological humanism? If so why; and if not, why not? Answering these questions will take us back for a moment into the history and philosophy of science, especially into issues concerned with the character of science as a rational human practice and tradition of inquiry.

Science, Faith and Rationality

We have seen that those who established a Science of religion, and scholars today who continue to be experts in comparative religion, religious studies, or comparative theology (i.e. comparative religious philosophies) all reject the idea of bias on the part of a researcher towards *any* religion or worldview—perhaps most especially their own. But can any Science be truly objective? Is it really possible to abstract from one's own deeply held values completely? Is the true goal of any Science value-free and neutral objectivity in the quest for pure logic and truth alone? There has been a massive debate on this topic by many important philosophers in the twentieth century. Any attempt to summarize this debate would take us far off our current course and purpose. While no consensus has emerged in the history and philosophy of science concerning these important questions, a few broadly received perspectives will be all we need for our purposes here (see further Padgett 2003).

The notion of a value-free science has largely been replaced by a greater appreciation for the fact that all the academic disciplines or Sciences are, in fact, *human practices* which take place within *established traditions of inquiry* (Kuhn 1970; Polanyi 1959; Lakatos 1978; MacIntyre 2006: 3–23). To learn a natural or human science is not to be trained in pure *a priori* logical reasoning or in universal axiomatic systems of deductive truth, but is closer to being apprenticed into any valuable skill which requires mentoring into a community of experts: thinking, insight, growth in knowledge and hard work. A student of any specialized Science is thus inducted into a community of truth-seeking fellow scientists, whose reasoning is shaped by that tradition of inquiry. No science is without presuppositions and important values that shape its methodology, or if you like, its rationality (McMullin 1982). The epistemological values that are embedded in the

contingent, historical and humanly constructed Sciences (academic disciplines) are not pure noetic truths—at least not most of them—yet with successful and fruitful sciences they should be given prima facie epistemic warrant unless there is some reason to doubt them (see further Padgett 2003: 167–94).

Another implication of this set of conclusions from the philosophy and history of science is that the nineteenth-century dream of a pure logical rationality, a scientific thinking that was value-free and in-principle universal, has been overturned. There is no "view from nowhere" in an epistemology that knows what it is about. While there is thus no perfectly neutral and value-free rationality, the alternative is not the oft-feared relativism of anything goes. Rather, a modest objectivity which sees this as a communal goal and a practice within a tradition of inquiry, which among other goals values careful and rigorous attention *to the object of study* is one quite reasonable option in keeping with the aims and discoveries of modern science over time (Padgett 2012). Such a "practical objectivity" agrees that the values embedded in a Scientific community are not absolute, *a priori* truths, but deserve nevertheless our epistemological respect. We should adopt them when investigating their area of expertise, unless significant reasons cause us to doubt a specific one or its proper application.

Finally, we can see that while such traditions of inquiry provide important elements in any worldview that hopes to be scientific, no Science or set of Sciences is, itself, a complete worldview. Thus room exists for the deepest values and commitments of an individual researcher to shape, and be shaped by, the more focused and narrow discoveries and values of their particular expertise. This final point cannot be emphasized enough in the context of our present question, where issues of faith, reason, values and rationality loom large. Sure, no discipline as a whole will share all of our values or complete worldview; but there is room for the larger worldview of the researcher to influence Science in a rational, logical manner. This is what I and Robert J. Russell mean by the "mutuality" of theology and science (Padgett 2003; Russell 2008). Larger commitments and accepted truths are bound to influence the rational investigator at the boundaries and edges of their Scientific pursuits, just because a rational person will allow other truths to influence things like theory-choice among otherwise equally good theories. Of course higher-level epistemological values can and should over-rule such background commitments when there is a clearly demonstrable truth or best theory to be had—but at the growing edges of Science this is usually not the case. The scientist is, in such situations, perfectly rational in allowing her worldview to influence areas where one looks for new discoveries, or one's best hunch as to which theory among currently disputed ones might win out over the long run.

To see this clearly it is important to make two distinctions. First we have to distinguish between the rational commitments and methods of a whole tradition, and the necessarily larger beliefs, values and knowledge of individual experts in that Science. In other words, we have to distinguish between the individual scientist and the larger community of scholars, classic texts, accepted paradigms and practices that make up the discipline as a whole. Second, we have to distinguish between two ways in which larger truths and values from the individual's worldview might influence their Scientific activity: implicitly as a background to the informal logic of their specific Science; or explicitly, when the researcher adds their own personal commitments to the content of their scientific arguments, explanations and publications. We will argue here that the first way in which theistic faith can influence religious studies is rational and should be accepted by experts; the second way, on the other hand, is contrary to the best traditions of the Science of religion.

With these definitions, distinctions and qualifications, we are now ready to consider three vexed questions in the contemporary debate about the academic methods and differences between theology and religious studies. All these questions spark a large debate among experts in either field. First, what difference if any exists between theology and religious studies? Second, does theology as a Science presuppose the faith-commitments of a specific religion? Third, should the individual faith or worldview of the researcher be brought into the Scientific study of Religion?

Theology and Religious Studies as Sciences

It is well-known that since the founding of universities in Europe, and indeed before then, theology was understood to be a spiritual practice, a form of religious wisdom, *and* a "science" (*scientia*). We cannot review here the long story of academic theology among Jews, Christians and Muslims in the millennium in which such a view was widely accepted. But we can and should take note that for most of this period, from roughly 900–1900 CE, scholars in all three religious traditions saw theology as a *scientia* that was based explicitly upon a particular religious faith. Muslim, Jewish and Christian theology *as academic disciplines* built upon the standard forms of God's revelation which each religion accepted and embodied (Evans 1980; Burrell 1986; Stroumsa 2009 among many others).

Specific Faith and Theological Science

There are many ways of defining the goals and methods of theology as a Science, that is, as an academic discipline. Traditionally, theology would be the academic and conceptual stream of a religious tradition. In the Abrahamic faiths, the shortest definition of theology is simply the knowledge of God (faith and revelation being assumed). As such, it is always explicitly based upon the particular faith and revelation (or source of enlightenment) found in that religion. Theology would in this case be wholly rational and wholly faith-full. There are, however, more descriptive and less tradition-based understandings of theology. These views either explicitly or implicitly are influenced by the Science of religion, seeking to "do theology" in a way that respects and draws from any and all religious wisdom, wherever it might be found (Ford 2005: 61–3, 78; Wiebe 1999). There is nothing precisely *wrong* with this more modern, pluralistic notion of theology, although I would prefer to call it "comparative theology" and situate it within religious studies (Clooney 2010). But it automatically leaves out any truths that might be discovered only on the basis of accepting the faith, spirituality and sources of revelation (enlightenment) *within* a particular religion. Second, because this theological approach does not reside fully within a particular religious and spiritual community, its suggestions for new theories and practices, and revisions of old ones, will always be limited to some degree. Still, the descriptive task of theology understood as embracing any and all religious wisdom will be a valuable and interesting study—even if we need to carefully distinguish this discipline from the traditional, faith-based rationality of theology as normally understood.

In the rest of this chapter, I will use "theology" as a Science to mean a fully rational and fully faith-full inquiry of the mind, heart and spirit, done within a specific religion. I will call the more modern and pluralistic concept of theology "comparative theology" to distinguish it from the traditional *scientia* which has for centuries been called

theologia. As a Science, theology will naturally be done in community with other people of faith *and* those outside of that faith who are interested in academic dialog regarding it. There are, after all, specialists in biblical studies, church history, and Christian ethics who are not in fact Christians (to speak of the theologians I know best), and they add a rich variety of insights and perspectives. To be different is not *ipso facto* to be inferior or dubious.

Thus it is not too hard to make peace in the so-called "politics" (Wiebe 1999) of theology vs. religious studies; all we need allow is that there is more than one valid way to do theology and to study religion. Differing aims and areas of study will lead to different methodologies and epistemic values, but these two fields can be complementary rather than conflicting. All that a faith-based rationality would ask is that it also be respected, understood and read as a legitimate Science (we have to say "academic discipline" today) alongside the others (Placher 1989; Macdonald 2010). There does not have to be war between Christian theology, for example, and religious studies, when each can learn to appreciate and value the insights and differences of the other. What Christian academic theologians sometimes have to explain is simply the very idea of a faith-based rationality, especially to a secularist academy (Marsden 1997).

Theistic Faith and the Science of Religion

The irenic stance I recommend above between theology as a faith-based Science and the Science of religion is, perhaps, harder to sustain with respect to a final question: what place, if any, shall theistic faith play in the Science of religion? Here we should probably begin with an acceptance of the epistemic value and methodological descriptive goals of the Science of religion (now religious studies) as set out by Max Müller, and embraced by the field ever since. No religion or anti-religious view can be allowed precedence or preference. Whatever the worldview and philosophy of life the scholar might have as an individual, *in this Science no explicit faith is to be preferred or promoted over any other* (or any other non-religious view for that matter, such as atheism). We have called this "religious neutrality," and I find it to be an important value for the limited goals of the Science of religion. This "neutrality" will not be embraced by any one individual scholar all the time but, rather, is a commitment of the whole community of scholars of religion *qua* academic community. Like the epistemic values in any mature science, those who begin to study comparative world religions as human phenomena are most rational who accept the procedures, practices, methods and broad conclusions already found in the various streams of thought within the tradition of the mature Science of religion. But the general rule of thumb, the prima facie acceptance of the rationality of a given Science in its limited domain of inquiry, has an important limit: it is rational to accept the goals, methods and values of a mature science *unless there is some reason to doubt them*. This point brings us to our last highly contested question: for those scholars of religion who embrace a lively theistic faith, is there good reason to doubt a traditional epistemic value found in the Science of religion, which we have named religious neutrality?

The first thing to be said, in answering this question, is that the epistemic principle of religious neutrality, embedded in the generations-long Scientific study of religion, has yielded a great deal of significant knowledge. Religious studies, as a discipline, has contributed a vast amount of knowledge and insight to our understanding of the human condition, to human societies, and to the common religious element found in them all. This is a valuable tradition which should not be lightly set aside.

Second, the principle of religious neutrality does not apply to every aspect of a Scientific approach to religion. We have argued for a complementarity and cooperative dialog between academic theology and religious studies; one based upon a specific rationality founded in a specific faith, the other embracing an effort to compare and study all religions without prejudice toward any of them. Both approaches to religion are equally valuable, and it depends completely on the kind of truth we are seeking, which should rightly be pursued by the individual scholar. If we are interested in descriptive and comparative study of the way all human cultures have responded to the Sacred, as they understand it, that is one thing (religious studies). If we seek greater wisdom and insight, greater knowledge of and spiritual connection with this sacred reality, that will require us to enter into the faith, spirituality, religious practices and way of life found in a specific religious community and tradition (theology).

Finally, we can agree that this "religious neutrality" is a kind of language game played by scholars of religion—a "game" only in the serious sense of Wittgenstein, that is, a language and "grammar" which is grounded in a whole way of life (what he called a "form of life"; Wittgenstein 1958). This further implies that the "grammar" of religious studies, which includes among other things the epistemic value of religious neutrality, will apply to a limited and focused area of religion—but a valuable and useful one nevertheless. As a descriptive, comparative, and human-focused academic discipline, religious studies cannot tell us everything we might want to know that is broadly "religious" in character. Yet this is the flip side of the very power of a particular speciality—it has a limited but deep grasp of some aspect of reality. All of the sciences derive their power from the narrow and fixed focus of their practical objectivity. This is both a limit and a great strength.

What I am concluding is this: in the famous debate between "insider" and "outsider" in the understanding of religion, *both* perspectives are important. The so-called "outsider" who values descriptive and scientific work has much to teach us; and yet so does the fervent practitioner ("insider") of that particular spiritual Way. I find most of the either/or literature in this debate generates more heat than light (Knott 2005).

Thus the theist will want to bring his faith with him into the study of religion. And so must we all bring our deepest values and commitments with us when we enter into any Science. The specific insights brought by the theist into religious studies might provide some clues or suggestions as to where new information and insights can be gained in the Science of religion. But those insights and theories will need to be demonstrated to the community of religious studies *using the grammar of this Science*. The particulars of one's own religion might provide an individual with insight; but to prove that to others, in that area of human study which is the chosen specialty of the Science of religion, the individual will need to adopt the methodology and specific epistemology of this community of scholars who profess many religions and none at all. Let us take an historical example. It could be that my own monotheism leads me to believe that the most primitive religion of the human race was monotheist. But in order to prove this historical claim, I will need more than an appeal to my own limited theological assumptions. I will need historical evidence, and will have to argue my point with equally learned colleagues who do not share my faith and assumptions. Here the "outsider" values of the Science of religion come to bear most centrally. I conclude that as long as we are seeking evidential knowledge of comparative religions, there is no reason to doubt the generations-old epistemic value of religious neutrality in the discipline of religious studies.

Finally, it must be noticed that were speaking here of a community of scholars adopting this limited version of religious neutrality together, for a specific purpose. A single investigator might, indeed, want to know more than religious studies can provide. She might want to follow the evidence, and her own growing sense of what is important about life in general, into domains that take her beyond the self-imposed evidential limits of the Science of religion. But this is perfectly fine for the individual who is seeking enlightenment. It could be, ironically, that the greatest and deepest questions that we broadly call "religious" will always take us beyond what religious studies can provide.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 15: Humanities; Chapter 38: Education

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Recommended Reading

Capps, W. (1995) *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Minneapolis: Fortress. This is one of the best surveys of the development of religious studies, and the various approaches and arguments surrounding it. Capps also presents his own perspective.

Hinnells, J. R. (ed.), (2005) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge. A fine collection of informative essays which provides an introduction to the current issues in the field.

Müller, F. M. (2002) *The Essential Max Müller*, edited by J. R. Stone, London: Palgrave Macmillan. An excellent collection of essays from the most important early figure calling for a science of comparative religions. It also contains a useful introduction by the editor.

Padgett, A. G. (2003) *Science and the Study of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Several of the arguments made in this chapter depend upon conclusions made in this earlier work, comparing and contrasting the sciences with Christian theology.

Wheeler-Barclay, M. (2010) *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860–1915*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. This volume focuses down on early debates within one nation, which provides a window into the origins of religious studies, and the debates and issues surrounding it.