

**Toward an Integrated Understanding of
Religion and Society:
Hidden Premises in the Scientific
Apparatus of the Study of Religion**

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INTRODUCTION

It is an important fact in the history of the study of religion that the development of sociology as a scholarly discipline has contributed greatly to the development of *Religionswissenschaft*, or the History of Religions, by opening new vistas in the understanding of “religion.” For example, two prominent sociologists whose achievements cannot be disregarded in the sociological study of religion—Émile Durkheim and Max Weber—made such contributions through their treatment of religion within the framework of the academic, systematic discipline of sociology.

We should not forget, however, that seen from the viewpoint of *Religionswissenschaft*, the basic principle of sociology has been “society,” that “man is a social being,” and not that “man is a religious being.” We can understand Durkheim as having, through his grasp of religious phenomena on the level of *social entities*, overcome the positivistic theories of religion of the nineteenth century; Weber, for his part, on the one hand overcame the materialistic positivistic theories based on the idea of economic determinism, and on the other hand was able to overcome the difficulties involved in the idealist views of the neo-Kantian philosophers. *Religionswissenschaft* thus has recognized the importance of sociological research in religion, and—often through the subordination

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of the sociology of religion to the phenomenology of religion—made it into one part of a larger study of religion, which is based on the synthesis of various academic disciplines (see, for example, Wach 1967).

This subordination, however, in no way means that the various concepts and categories of sociology are always by themselves correct and effective in the scholarly study of religion. Indeed, seen from the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft*, which takes as its central academic problem the understanding of religion, there are many instances where these various concepts, categories and methods of sociology have become, on the contrary, problematic; at times, they have even been a hindrance or outright obstruction. Frequently in the past—and this applies even to those cases that were successful—the sociology of religion has ended up in sociological reductionism because of its academic premise. Even when this has not happened, moreover, studies have frequently dealt with neither religion nor society as it is focused around religion, but only with behavior related to religious and social phenomena—and these, in truth, were forced into ideally constructed methods and hypotheses. This is not even reductionism, but is what I. C. Jarvie has dubbed “false religion” or “disease,” something more than mere idle gestures. This situation has, moreover, scarcely changed, even today (see Jarvie 1964 and Penner 1971, pp. 91–97).

One of the most important academic tasks of modern *Religionswissenschaft*, beginning with the work of Joachim Wach, has been to obtain a correct and integral understanding of both religion and society; the problem of how one should view the two in order to obtain this correct understanding is becoming more and more important to scholars of *Religionswissenschaft*. If we divest religious phenomena of their social aspects it is impossible to see religion as an integral whole, and an understanding of the worlds of meaning and religion that support a society cannot be lacking if we are to have an integral understanding of that society.

Seen from this perspective I believe that a discussion of Bryan

Wilson's essay which would question it from the viewpoint of *Religionswissenschaft* will perhaps promote a more correct and integrated understanding of both "religion" and "society."

WILSON AND THE WESTERN MYTH OF SCIENCE

Even so, however, an overall understanding of this essay shows us that the viewpoint of Wilson's sociology of religion, as is clear from both the title and the contents of the essay, provides neither fundamental criticism of nor reflection on the old Western mythology of and belief in science. His viewpoint is rather directly supported by this myth-complex and could even be called "scientism," the viewpoint of the old social *sciences* which holds that one should pattern oneself after the natural sciences. In spite of the fact that it vigorously intones the words objectivity and empiricism, the essay is heavily colored by an old-fashioned evolutionistic model, one that takes modern Western society as its exemplar, and this model, contrary to Wilson's claims, is itself an outlook on the world that is neither value-free nor neutral in its historical or cultural perspectives or in its ethics. This coloration makes the model weak in both objectivity and empiricism, and it is even problematic given the historical and cultural conditions of today's world.

What Wilson repeats constantly, throughout the entire essay, expressed in its most concise way, is the modern scientific standpoint of treating religion as something old-fashioned, as a *social* (as he conceives such) reality gradually coming to lose its social function. This is the viewpoint of a social scientist who has been overwhelmed by science, or, perhaps, it is the scientific dogma supported by the ideas of the old "sociology," stressed so often by the classical sociologists, that religion and metaphysics should be replaced by sociology. Wilson's methodological pronouncement is thus that, since the sociology of religion is a science, the sociologist of religion is a scientist, and that what he perceives is the truth. This repetition is made endlessly in a variety of forms and amounts to an unadorned confession of faith in science.

The theory that sustains this scientific sociology of religion held by Wilson is that of old-fashioned functionalism. Adopting as such the viewpoint that "Religion was man's way of understanding society before the development of sociology," he focuses his research on the role played by religion in society, and ultimately seems to want to replace religion with the sociology of religion. Even so, the result of such research is neither an understanding nor an explanation or interpretation of religion; it is not even sociological reductionism. If we can go so far as to say that anything has been explained at all, it would have to be society, insofar as society is related to a functionally varying religion. This, however, is a tautology and a logical error. Wilson's theory, like those of other functionalists, is constructed on the basis of a reversal of the laws of cause and effect, of "causes and their effects," or of "that which came first and its results," and holds that what in reality is an unintended effect of religion (its social function) is its cause.

This is, in short, a methodology that holds that the loss of social function means the decline of religion, and that the fulfilling of such means its prosperity. It is not necessary to repeat here the severe criticism levelled against functionalism by scholars such as Hempel (1961), Spiro (1967), Penner (1967), Jarvie (1967) and others. I would note, even so, that this theory holds that religion and society have been explained even though religion itself remains unexplained. Contrary to Wilson's claims, his explanation of religion is neither experiential nor empirical. This is because we can see neither religion nor religious phenomena in his theories. Why, then, does religion not appear in this theory? Let us delve more deeply into his essay and call his way of thinking and methodology into question.

WILSON AND THE "SCIENTIFIC" METHOD

Wilson accepts uncritically in this essay, with no attempt at modification, the work of several people who advanced sociology or the scientific study of religion. These include Comte, Saint-

Simon, Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Freud, K. Davis, and others; the ideas of all of these people, viewed from the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft* or anthropology, come under the limits of their respective places in the history and culture of the modern West, and each of them presents serious problems in his grasp of religion. Further, the ideas of these people as well as their historical and cultural implications do not necessarily agree as they seem to in Wilson's summations. In any event the history of social science that is being transmitted by Wilson here is one that sees religion as something "old-fashioned," "without foundation," as "mistaken," or "even though mistaken, a useful fiction"; no matter how it might be put, it "is something that should be replaced by science."

This is a view that Wilson has held consistently since his earlier writings, and it is precisely this view that is called "Wilson's theory of the decline of religion"; it is a "prophecy" made under the mantle of science. This should probably not be taken apart from the extremely common views of that part of the modern Western intellectual "academic circle" of which Wilson is himself a member and on which he is dependent. When, however, the values and measures of the society of the researcher himself—and these themselves contain many problems—or the values and measures of the individual researcher—which have been formulated by the limitations of his circles—enter directly into the methodology of religious research, then the objectivity of the scholarship must be said to be already completely out of the question. It must be remembered that Wilson's "academic circle" is a singular substructure within the modern West, which is itself a particular culture in the general history of mankind.

Basing himself on scientism, Wilson creates *a priori*, partly unconsciously and partly out of research methodological considerations, a distance between religion and science, between those people committed to religion and those who study it. The creation of this distance is the most fundamental apparatus for making him able to recognize his sociology as being "science." This distance,

however, poses serious difficulties in Wilson's research on religion and society. According to Wilson (p. 20):

Sociology sought—and still seeks—to explain religion, and to do so in essentially scientific terms. The sociologist's interest in values is to regard them as data: other men's values are the sociologist's facts. Even though later sociologists were less sanguine than Comte, Hobhouse, and even Durkheim, that sociology would in the future be able to square the circle by providing a strictly rational basis for values, nonetheless, values, including intimations of the supernatural, metaphysical speculations and ideas, emotional orientations, beliefs, rituals, and patterns of religious socialization and organization, were to be the subject of scientific, sociological enquiry.

In other words, the sociologist, who strives to explain religion in "essentially scientific terms," sees religion as *value systems*, and takes the *value systems* of religious practitioners—*other people*—as his data. There are, however, two rather difficult problems in this.

The first of these lies in the rendering of such religious phenomena as myths, symbols, rituals and the like—phenomena that defy comprehension in ordinary terms and that have many opaque and ambiguous aspects—in the social science jargon of "value systems" merely to provide more secular terms that are easier to treat. In the social *science* terminology that permeates Wilson's essay we see no sense of the necessity for a scholarly explanation of religion as religion, as a living, religious reality; neither do we see any trace of this in the essay's academic attitude or methodology. This does not explain religion as religion, but merely transfers religion into the terminology of social science, pushing human beings into the narrow confines of a dry, meaningless world of science.

The second problem, closely related to the first, is expressed in the coarseness of the *fact-consciousness* contained in Wilson's "scientific methods." What he refers to as "data"—in other words,

that which is considered to be “fact” to the sociologist—includes only the value systems of “other people,” and there is no attempt made to bring into question in an equal way those value systems of the sociologists who attempt to explain the various religious value systems. This is the optimistic pitfall of scientism.

The religions that Wilson deals with in his other writings are primarily the religions of the contemporary world, and this is also true of the object of his research in the essay under review. Between these religious movements and the structure of the modern society that nurtures the sociologist, the very strength of modern society, however, there is a sociological and dynamic relationship that cannot be overlooked. This relationship is, however, along with the phenomenological suspension of judgment as well as the perspective of trying to explain religion as religion, left out of the framework of the old sciences, which pattern themselves after the natural sciences. These omitted factors are then replaced by the distance between religion, now renamed and called a “value system,” and the researcher who studies religion as a sociological fact.

This distance, however, which has been created in part as a scientific methodology, establishes between Wilson’s science and historically living religions an ontological and epistemological gap that can ultimately never be filled. This distance exposes, through the various terms used uncritically by Wilson himself throughout the essay to define religion on the one hand and, in contrast with this, to define his sociology as science on the other, the peculiar nature of the cultural and historical significance of Wilson’s *science*.

Let us look at some of the terms Wilson uses in various sections of the essay to contrast “the world of religion” and “the world of sociology (science)”: “subjective” vs. “objective”; “unconscious” vs. “conscious”; “voluntary” vs. “planned” or “systematic”; “metaphysical” vs. “positivistic”; “arbitrary” vs. “scientific”; “amateurish” vs. “professional”; “irrational” vs. “rational,” and the like. The list could easily be expanded. He employs a

group of terms for religion that show his stance to be clearly negative, while compared to this, the words he uses for sociology as a science express a positive meaning. It is not, however, very easy to accept as truth such numerous one-sided comparisons that themselves lack objectivity. Here we can see a simple, dogmatic comparison that can hardly be distinguished from that pointed out by Robert Redfield in his "Primitive World View" as the dichotomous, antithetical comparisons such as "man/not-man" or "we/they," the typologies that make up the world view of so many archaic cultures (Redfield 1952).

Because of this distance, in short, when Wilson uses the word "they," it is simply in the sense of *us* (those who belong to the world of science) and *them* (those who live in the world of religion), and he sees *our* world as being completely different from *their* world. Not only does he make this distinction, he also postulates that *we* are always, and in a variety of ways, superior, and that *they* are inferior. Such a postulation is an infantile, self-righteous *sleight-of-hand*. It goes without saying, however, that such an archaic comparison inevitably follows the establishment of the nearly unbridgeable distance described above and that it is itself an unconscious comparison devoid of even scholarly objectivity. Then, when we compare the differences between *us* and *them*, all viewpoints, principles and measures are located within the enclosed world of *our* "science," and no attempt is made to take up matters from *their* side.

Such comparisons constitute the most fundamental apparatus of Wilson's research framework, which stresses that religion is an object of study. The one-sided distance and comparison that have been established between *us* and *them* become an unstated premise, and the subsequent *manipulation* (which can be nothing more than a *technical* manipulation) becomes the collection, classification and comparison of a body of material of "sociological reality" (religious phenomena) which is the object of study. At this point it is now possible to apply that which in Wilson's sociology of religion is called "the empirical scientific method"—or

alternatively, "objective methods of inquiry," or "a distinct and self-conscious ethical neutrality," or "detachment from the data," or "standard methods of measurement"—to religious phenomena as sociological reality.

All the same, once there has been established between the subject and object of research a large distance that includes value judgments, it is no longer any use to toss about words such as empirical, objective, conscious neutrality. Be that as it may, however, the methods and attitudes noted here could be called fundamental problems of almost any academic discipline, and they cannot be invoked particularly to call sociology a science.

The most important method in making science into science is generally said to be the "empirical method," but, just as Wilson recognizes, sociology is severely limited in this respect compared to the natural sciences. To carry out research with a scientific orientation in spite of this, however, entails the collection and analysis of material gained through interviews and surveys made by questionnaires, all fieldwork based on the "distance" between research object and subject. This process should be essentially a creative thing, located as it is on the boundaries between the contributions of past scholarship and new materials.

After the one-sided creation of this great distance, however, even though one might call oneself "sympathetic," one can go no further than that amount of social intercourse needed for the collection of material. One could not be expected to greatly exceed the level of attempts to force the object of study into this recently constructed, seemingly accurate framework called "scientific," and this cannot be a process through which to bring our understanding of religion to new horizons of knowledge.

THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

To repeat, Wilson believes fully in the authority of science, and has developed his methodology by enclosing himself in the territory of science. No fundamental questioning of or introspection on the society that nurtures him, or on the values and frameworks

that support society, are included in this methodology. The distance between the *they* who are the objects of the study and the *we* who are the researchers, and the tension between the two that this distance has brought about dissolve fully in the faith in scientism and positivism.

Here there is no chance for either questions leading to the reformation of the researcher's way of acquiring knowledge or of his ontological horizons, or for the birth of a concern that would deepen his own understanding of the world. Here religion becomes fragmented in the midst of scientific terminology and there is no question of seeing it as an integral whole. Here there is no evaluation of the *universal elements* of the various religious phenomena.

This is because the researcher himself assumes his own position to be universal, transcending that of the various religious phenomena, and sees these phenomena as being idiosyncratic. Because he sees the various religious phenomena as being mere idiosyncratic sociological realities, or social phenomena—as being, in short, no different from secular elements, things which take place on a purely human plane—there is no insight to be gained into either the particularity they express, or, at the same time, the universal ontological ground they occupy by virtue of their transcendence revealed through this particularity. Even in the section entitled “Limitations of the sociology of religion” we will find no consideration of the limits of research methodology concerning the problem of the understanding of religion.

This point is underscored by the fact that Wilson was unable to reply clearly to the following question I put to him from the point of view of *Religionswissenschaft* during a seminar in which his paper was discussed: “Have you ever changed, or been changed, through your dealings with these various religious phenomena?”

Wilson made some additions and corrections to his paper after receiving the criticisms of the seminar participants, which resulted in a weakening of his optimistic scientism and a more moderate product. The essay's basic structure, however, was not corrected

at all. As an example of this, he has added a defense of his sociology of religion that really takes the form of an attack, from the questions raised by *Religionswissenschaft* and the phenomenology of religion. Unfortunately, however, he makes no effort to deal with the central scholarly concerns of *Religionswissenschaft* or the most vital aspects of the phenomenology of religion in any depth at all, and the result is that he has shoved sociological research even more firmly into the narrow confines of the old-fashioned sociological fictions. This means that research on religion does not go beyond the most superficial level, not entering at all into the most fundamental problems of religion; to compound matters, he claims to have explained and interpreted religion. Ironically, he refers to himself in his role as sociologist of religion as a "photographer," but the images he has taken with his apparatus go no further than the surface, are strangely distorted, and bear virtually no resemblance to the real thing. He has definitely failed to make a picture of religion.

In order for the sociology of religion to be able to bring any significant scholarly results to the study of religious phenomena, it must present an integrated, correct understanding of religion and society. To do this it must overcome a vast number of problems. My space in this essay is limited, however, and I will stop with the presentation of the most minimal of these problems. Above all, I think, it is necessary to overcome the ideology of scientism, positivism and objectivism, which have so frequently in the past come to provide the framework for the sociology of religion.

To put this more emphatically, however, the sociology of religion will have to go beyond its singular scholarly preconception that "man is a social being," and positively incorporate the starting point of *Religionswissenschaft*, that man is fundamentally a religious being (*homo religiosus*). This cannot simply end with the question of whether the researcher is committed to a particular religion or whether he stands inside or outside the religious world. When we reach the universal horizon that recognizes all people, including the researcher, and society itself, as being essentially

religious, then for the first time the institutional and non-institutional forms of religion, its historical and cultural forms, its ontological horizons and the religious meanings of its expansion—all these questions will become real, concrete themes of research.

If the comparative and typological approaches—and indeed, scholarship itself—do not try to grasp religious phenomena as irreducibly religious from such a perspective, under a real *pressure* originating from within the object of study, then scholarship will end in mere fictional, ambiguous abstractions. The modern Western “scientific” apparatus is insufficient for the integrated comprehension of society and religion; it is even a hindrance. I think that sociology has much to learn from *Religionswissenschaft* about research methodology and the understanding of religion.

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