The faith of the scholars: Theology and religious studies

by Daniel L. Pals in the September 8, 1999 issue

The Politics of Religious Studies, by Donald Wiebe

The gradual dilution of sustained, rigorous catechism in churches and synagogues means that young people often make their first serious contact with the claims of religion not in the presence of a committed pastor, rabbi or parish priest, but in the classroom of a university or college professor of religion. Who that person is and what he or she may think about religion are thus weighty questions, not just for science and the academy, but also for communities of belief, and indeed, the entire moral and spiritual fabric of our culture. Is religion derided in the classroom? Is it being debunked in the faculty office?

It will surprise many to learn that Donald Wiebe's concerns run in the opposite direction from these familiar fears. In his view, it is the universities, not the churches, that need to worry. The loss of intellect, not of souls, is his concern. He thinks scientific ideals for the study of religion have collapsed under the pressure exerted by religious belief. The modern academic study of religion, while aspiring to be objective and scientific, has in fact been compromised by the intrusion of faith upon its mission. Though professors of religious studies have won academic legitimacy by pledging allegiance to the rigorous methods of empirical science, behind this facade they still promote religion—in some instances through an implicitly Christian theology, in others through a broad endorsement of the religious posture. In the ancient words of Tertullian, these professors claim the voice of Athens, but their accent is that of Jerusalem; and like Peter in Pilate's court, their speech betrays them.

Over the years Wiebe has carried his battle to multiple fronts and warmed to the fight in many a disputatious page. Most of what he has said can be tracked along two main paths of argument: one historical, the other theoretical. Historically, he contends that a truly scientific study of religion first emerged, with great intellectual

promise, in the closing years of the 19th century. It was shaped by pioneering figures like F. Max Muller in England, C. P. Tiele and P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in the Netherlands, and Morris Jastrow in the United States. All had a deep commitment to the methods of empirical science. They knew that they needed to collect data, to craft theories to explain that data, and to test these theories in accord with the naturalist paradigm of all science. Their promising venture went awry, however, in the first decades of the 20th century, when a different generation of scholars betrayed these high scientific ideals. (Wiebe's term for this misfortune, borrowed from classicist Gilbert Murray, is "the failure of nerve" in the academic study of religion.) Rudolf Otto in Germany, Gerardus van der Leeuw in the Netherlands and other assertively theological scholars discarded their predecessor's legacy and recaptured for confessional interests a discipline on the verge of becoming an objective science.

During the interwar years and after World War II, when the discipline migrated to the U.S. and blossomed in numerous colleges and universities, matters only got worse. Eventually, Mircea Eliade and his colleagues at the University of Chicago Divinity School finished the process of subversion. In opposition to the reductionist social science of secular thinkers like Freud, Durkheim and Marx, Eliade took a stand for the autonomy of religion and the humanistic paradigm of explanation. Religious studies, says Wiebe, are now only a kind of intellectual charade, devoid of respect in the academy.

Though not wholly implausible, Wiebe's account is flawed. The founders of religious studies whose commitment to science Wiebe lauds were also men of deeply religious purpose. They were in fact more explicit and assertive about the religious and moral aims of their work than were any of its theological traducers—including Eliade and his disciples. Wiebe is aware of the founders' religious commitment. He addresses the problem in two of his opening essays—one mainly on Muller, the other on Tiele—though too briefly, given its importance. He insists that for Muller "belief in the existence of God is not presupposed . . . as a necessary element in the framework of analysis of religions," while the theology in Tiele's science can be dismissed "as a matter of inadvertence."

Perhaps. But if theological aims can be disengaged from the science of religion as practiced by the discipline's founders, why can they not be disengaged from the work of Eliade and those whom Wiebe calls the discipline's betrayers? And wouldn't doing so make for a quite different history? Could the real story be found not in any

"failure of nerve," but in the rise of a largely consistent intellectual tradition? Though the scholars who belong to that tradition will always have diverse motives—religious, nonreligious, even antireligious—these motives are harmful only if they substantively affect the scholarship. Though Wiebe offers what he calls "case studies" in the failure of nerve, he mainly examines developments in the American Academy of Religion and at his own University of Toronto. His discussions offer neither sufficient detail nor comparison to be convincing.

Wiebe's tendency to address issues in general terms and to resist close comparative study also weakens his more theoretical argument. His charge that the intrusion of "theology" on religious studies has forced the abandonment of scientific ideals, making the AAR and its membership into a "religious mouthpiece" that confessionally endorses religion, is fundamentally mistaken. Of course, some religionists have at times spoken about their profession in ways that make their scholarship suspect, as Wiebe proves by reviewing 30 years of presidential addresses to the AAR.

There is a hazard, however, in looking to ceremonial addresses for evidence. On ceremonial occasions, scholars do not so much practice their discipline as reflect on its aims from a distance. They often take up important questions only in the most general fashion, at the expense of clarity. Consider Wiebe's censure of the AAR for developing a framework of research that endorses the "reality, truth and value of religion." Here we may reasonably ask: What precisely does "endorsement" mean in relationship to three broad and quite different abstractions? Émile Durkheim, the celebrated French sociologist of religion, can be said to endorse both the reality and value of religious practice, while clearly rejecting the truth of religious beliefs. Is he, an atheist, then also one of the discipline's theological betrayers? Does endorsement occur if just one these three things is affirmed? Must it be all three? Two of the three? The answer is: We do not know, because Wiebe does not discuss either the differences or the relationships among them.

Nor does he analyze the equally general term "religion" itself. Religions are complex enterprises that mix moral, metaphysical and historical affirmations. Does theological endorsement apply to just some of these affirmations, or to all? Some people endorse the value of the decalogue, while denying the truth of the story of Moses and the reality of the God who spoke to him. This would seem to be a theological endorsement of the moral values of Judaism, but not of its historical truth or monotheistic belief. Does moral endorsement, by itself, count as theological?

Even if we knew how Wiebe would define what it means to endorse religion, we still would not know how scholars of religion actually do this. Clearly, Wiebe does not mean that scholars who present papers at AAR conferences affirm miracles or cite biblical prooftexts to clinch their arguments. Nor does he merely mean that students of religion consider their subject important. Scholars in all disciplines think that. The real source of Wiebe's distress lies in what we can call the "humanist maneuver" in religious studies.

Most religionists start from the assumption that the beliefs and behaviors they examine are products of human thought, intention and emotion. Accordingly, they judge religion to be a phenomenon that does not lend itself well to empirically testable social-scientific theories. Religious activity needs instead to be approached through humanistic categories. It is best understood when scholars apply to it the same rules of analysis, evidence and logic used in philosophy, history and literature. Like these subjects, religion invites both scholar and student to engage enduring human questions.

But Wiebe rejects this straightforward rationale. He believes that religionists prefer humanist to social-scientific explanations because they find them more compatible with their personal theological convictions.

Though critics have a right to raise suspicions, motives are difficult to identify and measure. Wiebe wants confessionalism eliminated from the discipline. But one can just as reasonably be concerned that religionists are too little, rather than too much, animated by theological interests. Anyone who has attended the sprawling, annual meeting of the AAR-SBL—where agnostics, Adventists, Baptists and Mahayana Buddhists jostle amiably among the bookstalls—can testify that the reigning gods of the academy are tolerance, pluralism and relativism. The tendency is for these congenial spirits to move from coffee shop conversation, where they are welcome, into scholarly sessions, where they are decidedly less helpful. After all, scholarship thrives on its quarrels. The most vital scientific need is the critical, adversarial edge provided by cognitive dissidents, most of whom enter academic debate with prior motives and agendas, including theological agendas. Without these dissidents, only the dead hand of consensus prevails.

Scholars in religious studies have long been critical of the Austrian anthropologist Father Wilhelm Schmidt—who on impressive evidence framed the theory of original monotheism—because his work was guided by his Catholic faith, to which his theory

was rather too conveniently congenial. Meanwhile Freud's dismissal of religion won wide support among intellectuals, becoming one of the dominant scholarly programs of the age. Not until the 1980s and '90s did archival research by biographers and analysis by philosophers of science uncover the manipulations of evidence, exploitation of patients and artful pseudoscience that were built into Freud's theoretical edifice. Today we wonder not that Freud's edifice is falling, but that it stood so long. We may also wonder why during this long interval no scholar of, say, traditional Catholic or evangelical Protestant sensibility was driven by faith to challenge—on purely scientific grounds of evidence, theory and method—the entire Freudian project and thereby to stem its antireligious cultural influence. In this case a religionist with an aggressive theological agenda might have performed a genuinely scientific service to the discipline.

Feminist theory offers a more successful example of how a prior agenda was able to effect significant change. It first appeared as a social cause in the 1960s. It entered religious studies as a scholarly initiative in the 1980s, and since then has had transforming effect, giving us a different way of seeing religious history, belief and practice. The key to its success has been the feminist recognition that, while any set of outside motives can be brought to a discipline, it can only persuade by following the canons of logic, evidence and argument that obtain within the discipline.

Wiebe, then, need not be so suspicious of theology in religious studies—a now largely pluralist science that profits from the presence of dissident, adversarial voices. All scholars bring motives to their work. Most of their agendas are healthy, and should be welcomed.

Most, but not all. Ironically, since the time Wiebe began his crusade the kind of intellectual agenda that worries him most—calling into question the very canons of objective science—has entered the academic scene not through theologians but through postmodern philosophy and radical forms of cultural criticism. Both movements have influenced religious studies, posing a clear, frontal challenge to objectivity in the discipline. The threat to disinterested academic inquiry that Wiebe sees in theology has now actually appeared through philosophers like Richard Rorty and literary critics like Stanley Fish. This is the real and present danger to the science envisioned by Muller and Tiele. Yet there is not so much as a paragraph on this urgent issue in Wiebe's argument.

A fierce intellectual warrior, Wiebe has spent his career battling theology as the enemy within religious studies. But theologians are not—or at least not any

longer—the enemy. They are now his friends, who could use his support as they face a real adversary. Wiebe would be wise and generous to leave behind his old crusade and join the new debate, where his skills are urgently needed.