

Ethical Values through Religious Studies: Beyond the Western Myth of "Scientific" Neutrality

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I am grateful for the opportunity to return to Peking University once again, and for the very kind hospitality of the Department of Philosophy, and to Prof. Zang Zhigang in particular for his work on this conference. I am also grateful to Prof. Mel Stewart, the co-convener, and the Society of Christian Philosophy for including me in our third international conference.

Our theme, as we know, is ethics. In this paper I will discuss the ethical values that arise from study of comparative religions. My opponent is the Western myth of a value-free, purely scientific and historical approach to the study of religion. I will argue that this myth is not only false, but actually harmful to a quest for understanding another religious tradition. In other words, I will give both an epistemological and an ethical critique of this myth.

This question is just as important to American scholars as it is to Chinese. China has studied its own religious and philosophical past long before its encounter with Western science. The intellectual values developed by this tradition of historical scholarship never pretended to be purely objective, dispassionate, or purely "scientific." The so-called "Han learning" is a fine example of what I mean, during the Han dynasty. And in the Twentieth Century, Chinese philosophers such as Hu Shih (1891-1962) and Feng Youlan (1895-1990) have written impressive histories of Chinese philosophy. These histories come out of their own perspectives and interests, which the authors acknowledge. Yet their scholarship still honors the philosophies and texts that are being studied. They are aware of, and utilize, Western knowledge without abandoning the wisdom of China. For this reason, I find their work exemplary for comparative religions.

On the other hand, the discipline of religious studies, comparative religion, or Religionswissenschaft (I do not distinguish between these terms) has recently been imported from the West into China. For example, in 1964 the Institute for World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was founded, explicitly on a Western and "scientific" model of comparative religions. Such an approach is relatively new, given the centuries-long tradition of the study of philosophy and religion in China. A fine example of this approach to religious studies in China in the new volume from Shanghai Academy of Social Science, Religious Questions during the Socialist Period in China, (Chung-kuo she hui chu i shih ch'i ti tsung chiao wen t'i) edited by Luo Zhufeng, appearing in 1987.

I certainly think that it is a good thing that comparative religions is a growing discipline in China. I appreciate, as an American religious scholar and philosopher, the hard work of empirical research in this field. There are a number of very important questions, having to do with sociological and historical facts about Chinese religions, that these disciplines can and should seek to answer. But my concern today is that in adopting the methods and questions of Religionswissenschaft from the West, Chinese scholars may also buy into the myth of a purely objective, scientific approach to religious studies. So I plan to expose the myth as a myth today, in the hopes that Chinese scholarship will continue its excellent, classical tradition of mediation (the Mean) between personal interest and historical scholarship.

We begin with an analysis of this Western myth of neutrality. We can trace the origins of this myth to the European Enlightenment, and especially to the Deist controversy in England. Deism was an attempt to find a so-called "religion of reason," based upon the Enlightenment faith in reason and science. Because the Enlightenment was a Western movement, and because Christianity is the dominant religion of the West, the Enlightenment was forced to answer the question of the what a proper, scholarly, "enlightened" approach to Jesus was. The early and rather simple attacks of Deists called the miracle stories of the Gospels into question, as unscientific, even superstitious.^[1] From these early discussions of history and Scripture, a very sophisticated, historical-critical method developed, especially in Germany.

^[1] For an excellent historical review of biblical criticism during the Deist controversy, see Colin Brown, Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778-1860 (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988).

Perhaps the best-known of the early scholars was David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), one of Hegel's more important students. When Strauss used the term “scientific” with respect to religious studies (especially Christian theology) he meant it in an Hegelian sense, where science includes history and philosophy. The argument of scholars like David Friedrich Strauss was that the only proper, scholarly approach to Jesus was a purely historical, a purely scientific one that rejected all religious belief or “dogmas” as distorting and unscientific, along with any belief in miracles.^{2[2]} The story of the development of the quest for a scientific, “historical” Jesus has been traced too often to need review here.^{3[3]} The important point is this: there arose during the Enlightenment a conception of how best to approach the study of religion in an academic setting. The approach was an historical and “scientific” one, which sought to be neutral and value-free with respect to any of the religions.

The earliest example of such a neutral, historical and “enlightened” approach to religion known to me is by David Hume himself. In his slim volume, The Natural History of Religion (1757), Hume attempts to discover the psychological and social reasons for the widespread phenomenon of religions in all the cultures of the world, given the fact Hume proved (to his own satisfaction at least) that there are no rational reasons to believe in a god. A much fuller philosophical and “scientific” history of religions was provided by Hegel, in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (1832). This in turn was followed by a work more hostile to religion, more along the lines of Hume’s critique, by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). In response to Hegel’s idealism, Feuerbach in The Essence of Christianity (1841) provided purely

^{2[2]} David F. Strauss, The Life of Jesus Critically Examined (London, 1846; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972). This book was translated by the English novelist, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans).

^{3[3]} The classic source on this topic is Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, trans. W. Montgomery. (3rd ed., London: A. & C. Black, 1954). A better and more modern review is provided by the following three books: Brown, Jesus; Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986 (Oxford: Oxford University Pr., 1988); and Marcus Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993).

sociological and psychological reasons for religious belief.^{4[4]} In another work he tells us his goal in the study of religion and philosophy: “The task of the modern era was the realization and humanization of God – the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology.”^{5[5]} Although influenced by Hege, Feuerbach, like Hume, sought to demonstrate the purely human origins of religion, and unmask the illusions of theology.

There early works in religious studies were obviously flawed in many ways, not least their lack of attention to the phenomena of religion itself. The modern discipline of religious studies or Religionswissenschaft is best traced to three separate movements: (1) historical critical studies of the Bible, (2) comparative religious studies, and (3) phenomenology. The brilliant German philosopher and theologian, Ernst Troeltsch (1853-1923) represents the call for the use of historical-critical methods in the study of all religions. He began his academic career in theology, but later moved to history, philosophy and the study of religion in general. Ernst Troeltsch was a powerful and early voice, arguing that the proper method for the study of religion is a purely scientific historiography, that is value-free and religiously neutral.^{6[6]} Troeltsch’s philosophy of history is in fact very nuanced. He rejected any absolute certainty for historical judgement, concluding that our philosophical views of the world, and the results of historical science can sometimes conflict. Nevertheless, for Troeltsch as I read him, scientific historiography is an absolute value, arising within a particular context, that all academics should adopt qua academics.^{7[7]} So

^{4[4]} The Essence of Christianity was also translated by George Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957); see also his Lectures on the Essence of Religion, trans., Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

^{5[5]} ; Principles of the Philosophy of the Future, trans., Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 5 (principle no.1).

^{6[6]} See his essay, ‘Historiography’ in J. Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), vol. 6, pp.716-23.

^{7[7]} See the recent collection of his articles, Religion in History, trans. J. L. Adams and W. E. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

even when he is striving “to recognize an influence of faith on science” Troeltsch can’t help but write, “the empirical sciences in themselves are wholly independent of faith and follow their own laws.”^{8[8]}

Also during the end of the Nineteenth and early in the Twentieth Century, there arose a serious call for a “science” of religion. The so-called science of religion as then understood was a comparative study of religious texts and rites. Two scholars represent this early trend, Morris Jastrow (1861-1921) and F. Max Müller (1823-1900). Both Jastrow and Müller were scholars of oriental languages and religions. Jastrow was an American scholar, trained in Biblical studies, who worked at the University of Pennsylvania. Müller was a German scholar who moved to London to teach and lecture. In a series of four lectures, Introduction to the Science of Religion (1873), which was very influential in its time, Müller argued for an objective and comparative method in the study of ancient religious texts. Jastrow made a similar argument in his volume, The Study of Religion (1901). In both cases the historical and linguistic methods of the oriental linguist and the “modern” biblical scholar were applied to religious studies.

Finally, the method of phenomenology provides a third source for the contemporary Western discipline of religious studies. Phenomenology refers to a philosophical movement arising in Germany that focused on the rigorous analysis of what is presented directly to the senses, i.e. “the things themselves” stripped of metaphysical assumptions and philosophical baggage. The father of phenomenology was Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), one of the most influential philosophers of the early Twentieth Century in Europe. Husserl spent his academic career re-thinking the foundations of philosophical reflection. In a programmatic lecture, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” (1910) he stated the goals of his phenomenological method, which he understood to be free of presuppositions, purely descriptive, and scientific.^{9[9]} As a rigorous science phenomenology must pay attention to the objects of consciousness themselves, and provide careful analysis of them. The methods of phenomenology were taken by Husserl’s students and followers and applied to many areas of philosophy and social science, not least of which was

^{8[8]} Reason in History, 130.

^{9[9]} This essay is available in English translation in Husserl, Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy, ed. Q. Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

religious studies. The famous Hungarian scholar of world religions, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), would be only one example of this trend.

Modern Western religious studies, therefore, owes its origins to many factors and influences. But whether we examine phenomenological, historical-critical or comparative textual approaches in the early development of a science of religion, we discovered something like a myth of neutrality in religious studies. In my analysis of this Western myth of scientific and value-free religious studies, I have found three assumptions:

1. That religious faith distorts scientific, critical scholarship;
2. Because this is true, the only proper, academic, scientific methodology in religious studies is one that rejects religious faith itself, and
3. That a purely historical, scientific, faith-free and value-neutral methodology is available to us in what we might broadly call the social scientific disciplines.

This powerful and attractive ideology in Western culture is still responsible for much of the rhetoric in biblical studies about "scholarly" approaches to our topic. To be fair to Western scholarship, I want to make it clear that almost no scholar of comparative religion in America today would buy into this myth. It has been completely abandoned in the important universities where comparative religion is taught. Only in biblical studies do you still find the vestiges of this myth. But because it is so powerful and attractive (as all good myths are) I think we should go over the reasons why it is inadequate. Today I will put forth reasons why these three assumptions are should be rejected in favor of a more holistic and post-modern approach to religious studies.

Now the myth of a purely historical, scientific objectivity in religious studies, was working against another, earlier approach to religious history, called the dogmatic method or "apologetics" in the negative sense of these terms. In this method, one assumes the truth of a religion, and then finds this truth in the historical sources (surprise). This kind of vicious circular reasoning can in fact prove anything to be true. So I completely agree with modernity and its rejection of the earlier, dogmatic approach to religious history. Furthermore, I do believe that we must continue to study religions in an academic, scholarly way that accepts criticism and argument as necessary correctives to our biases and prejudices. I do not want to

be heard as suggesting that we throw-out rigorous, scientific research. My concern is not with our methods, but rather with our attitudes toward them and toward religious faith.

I have found in my own research in the history and philosophy of science that the cure proposed by Struass and his many followers is just as bad as the cold. This myth we find in modernity, of a purely historical, purely scientific, religion-free approach, is just as distorting of the truth in religion, and the truth about religion, as the early dogmatic method it replaces.

First of all, let's look at the assumptions of the myth. Now the first point is that, supposedly, religious faith distorts the quest for truth about religion. The best known and most sophisticated version of this part of the myth comes from a book by Van Harvey's The Historian and the Believer.^{10[10]} Harvey develops a "morality of knowledge" in which the religious faith of the believing historian so distorts and warps her judgement that the validity of her reasoning process is called into question. Harvey's book downplays two important factors. First, the secular unbeliever is just as distorted and warped by his prejudice and worldview as the believer is. Secondly, who is to say that faith does not give us better insight into the data than unbelief does? Why should unbelief, rather than faith, lead to the best explanation of the evidence? Would it be so strange if the followers of Jesus (to speak of my own faith) have an inside track in the understanding of Jesus? Why is faith so damaging to reason, anyway?

Granted that faith is a kind of prejudice, perhaps it is a helpful prejudice. Helpful prejudices can give us insight into the data, and clear the way for understanding. For example, the planet Neptune was discovered because of prejudice on part of astronomers in favor of classical mechanics. And the Marxist prejudice of liberation theologians has helped us see what the Bible really does say about poverty and liberation. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued, we all stand in some tradition, and have some prejudice, when we approach the task of interpretation.^{11[11]} Not all tradition and prejudice is bad: some can be helpful. All reasoning is based upon some prejudice, all insight and research takes place from a particular

^{10[10]} New York: Macmillain, 1966.

^{11[11]} Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method trans. J. Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd. English ed., New York: Continuum, 1991).

position, and in the light of a particular worldview and tradition of inquiry. There is no “view from nowhere” to borrow a phrase from Thomas Nagel.^{12[12]}

The question of whether a certain prejudice is helpful or harmful in the evaluation of evidence cannot be decided a priori as Harvey wants it to be.^{13[13]} It is only in the give and take of dialogue, and in the evaluation of reasons, arguments, and evidence, that our pre-understanding will be found to be helpful or harmful. I am not suggesting that we abandon rational inquiry, or scientific historiography. Nor do I suggest that religious scholarship return to the dogmatism of a previous age. Rather, I suggest that the myth of a neutral, scientific history, which Harvey assumes throughout his book, distorts the relationship between faith (or lack of it!) and historical research..

Now it is certainly true that a so-called “dogmatic” method, which presumes the results of critical inquiry before the give and take of evidence, argument and reasoning takes place, is destructive of true critical scholarship. But religious faith does not have to lead to dogmatism of this kind, and it often does not. I have met many dogmatic atheists, who arrogantly assume that scientific materialism is the only rational worldview, and that Christian theology is just another kind of ancient myth. Belief that all truth is God's truth, that God is the maker of heaven, earth, and of my neighbor, can and does lead to open enquiry, toleration, understanding, and careful scholarship. Moreover, have we forgotten that the founders of natural science were men of faith? For Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton belief in a rational Creator was a fundamental assumption for the scientific quest. So the first assumption of the myth, that religious faith corrupts scientific research, is false.

The second assumption in this ideology is, we must get rid of religious faith in order to rightly study religion. This assumption distorts genuine understanding of religion. This powerful myth blocks a

¹²[12] Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1985).

¹³[13] See. e.g., Harvey, 213. All of Harvey's discussion of “hard and soft perspectivism” is interesting just because he misunderstands the point being made that there are no objective standards of historical reasoning. Note his prejudice in favor of “what any historian would accept as a legitimate claim” (218), or again, “events that are otherwise known in the way any event can be known” (242).

balanced and open approach to both the truth in religion and the truth about religion. For genuine understanding and dialogue requires sympathy and appreciation. The myth of a purely historical approach to religion is biased against religion itself. It assumes, deep down, that religion is false, and for that reason must be excluded from the careful, dissecting, "objective" analysis of religions. But religion is not false. I have yet to study a world religion in which I did not discover a great deal of wisdom and truth. Ironically, then, the myth distorts the study of that which it was invented to assist.

The myth is in fact a road-block to historical knowledge of religion, because it promotes as skeptical approach to religious texts. For it is part of the myth that religious faith distorts our knowledge of reality. Since religious texts are written from a faith-perspective, they must be questioned at every turn. This is a method often used in New Testament studies. For example, in his book The Future of the Historical Jesus, Leland Keck writes (correctly in my view) that "every believer and every theologian has central things at stake in the historical study of Jesus."^{14[14]} I applaud Keck's rejection of the attempt to divorce faith and science, characteristic of some German scholars. But when Keck insists that "a skeptical attitude toward the sources is necessary," he has obviously bought into the Western myth of neutrality.^{15[15]} But why is a skeptical attitude necessary? Only because, as a hidden premise, we must doubt any historical claim that could come from a faith-perspective. But all historical writing we now know comes from a faith perspective. Our understanding of the nature of historiography has advanced beyond that of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Europe. Philosophers of science have correctly insisted that all worldviews contain an element of faith that cannot be proven, and all methodologies are based upon values and assumptions that are exterior to the discipline itself.^{16[16]} We must, indeed, accept a critical attitude toward all historical sources and artifacts. But a critical or rational attitude is not the same thing as a skeptical attitude, based upon a prejudice against religious faith in the sources. Such a skepticism, the "guilty until

^{14[14]} The Future of the Historical Jesus (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 38.

^{15[15]} Keck, 21.

^{16[16]} To take just two examples: Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1958), and Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1962).

proven innocent" attitude toward the New Testament, actually blocks good historical research. There is much we can learn historically from the Bible and other religious texts, but not if we insist on doubting every line of it until we can prove it to be true. So-called "critical scholarship" that writes a question-mark at the end of every sentence in the New Testament and then sees how many we can "neutrally and scientifically" erase is not good history. It is not even logical. In logic, we would call this the fallacy of "poisoning the well." In the history of philosophy, it represents Descartes' approach to epistemology, and that – believe me – is a dead end. So ironically, the myth ends up distorting the very quest for the truth about religion it was created to assist. Such is the human condition!

Finally, the last assumption is that historical science, or sociology, or philology or archeology provide us with value-free, neutral scientific approaches to the study of human Being. Contemporary philosophy of science, following the work of the later Wittgenstein and the later Heidegger, have rejected this perspective. All methods are part of our social and intellectual context. The logical positivist dream of a purely neutral, empirical, scientific approach that is value-free is dead. It's just that people in biblical studies have not discovered this fact yet. In fact, the ideal of dispassionate, objective study is itself a cultural value that arises from a particular time and culture.

In addition to epistemological reasons for rejecting the myth of scientific objectivity, I also want to point to some ethical criticism that should move us beyond this point of view. First, the myth promotes self-delusion. It allows researchers to believe about themselves – falsely of course – that their own faith-stance and their own worldview does not corrupt their research. One could almost here them say, "Faith may corrupt those religious researchers, over their, but not our pure historical-critical methodology!"

In addition to promoting self-delusion, there is a much more important reason to reject the myth of neutrality in religious studies. The idea that the only proper approach to religion is one that ignores or brackets religious faith is part of an over-all attempt to "free" science from the "biases" of religion and morality, an idea we can trace to the English Deists and the French encyclopedists. And this divorce has been destructive in our own century, to our own people. It leads to bad religion, and to bad science and technology. Who wants a religion divorced from reason, or scientific experiments and applications that ignore moral truth? We know now that science and technology are not autonomous realms, free from such

biases as respect for life and love for people of other cultures and classes. Science and technology, divorced from religious wisdom and moral values, is not only a myth but the nightmare of the Twentieth Century. Let us then reject forever, and ban from our research, our publication, and our conversation the myth of a purely historical, value-neutral, faith-free approach to religion. Let us abandon the fallacious arrogance which claims that only a skeptical approach is truly scientific. What shall we replace it with?

As I noted at the beginning of this talk, the Western myth of scientific neutrality has been abandoned in American departments of comparative religion. Only biblical scholars in America are still caught-up in the myth. But this leaves us with the question, how shall we now proceed? Does "anything go" in religious studies and biblical interpretation? Or is there some new methodology that we should be tending in the field of religious studies? How shall we understand the discipline of religious history in a post-positivist, post-modern situation? This is a question which Chinese and American scholarship can answer together, as we seek to understand each other's traditions and worldviews.

I cannot pretend to answer the question of methodology for Chinese scholarship. But I can say that recent work in epistemology in my country, among philosophers, has pointed to the need for intellectual virtues in any quest for knowledge and understanding.^{17[17]} Among many possible topics for discussion, there are five intellectual virtues that I want to identify, which I think are important to cultivate in any student of religion.

The first intellectual virtue, it seems to me, is a commitment to the truth. But I have argued that this alone is not enough. Scientific knowledge in and for itself is vacuous. Rather, we want a knowledge that is in service to love and to justice, to peace and to understanding among all people. It seems to me that the Confucian text, The Great Learning, is helpful at just this point, for it places the quest for knowledge within the service of a more just and peaceful society. So a second virtue must be, commitment to love and justice in the quest for truth.

^{17[17]} See the chapter by William Wainwright in this volume, and also his book, Reason and the Heart (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1995). As early as 1958, Polanyi was speaking of the importance of "intellectual passions" in his Personal Knowledge, chapter 6.

Along with a search for truth and a commitment to love and justice, comes a sympathy to the tradition we are studying, a love for its greatest insights, a hunger to know the truth from within that particular perspective. This intellectual value would reject a skeptical approach to a religious tradition as too objectifying, too analytical, to reap the reward of genuine understanding.

Third, there is a need to be open to criticism, which I think we can call intellectual humility. However scientific our methods may be, there is no certainty in our results. Our own presuppositions do shape and influence our research. Let us first just admit that, to ourselves and to those we seek to teach through lectures and publications. Let us be open and honest together about our faith and our tradition, which provides the horizon within which we do our research. We must do our best, as faithful scholars, to blend reason and religion, faith and science.^{18[18]}

Fourth and finally, although many other virtues and values could be discussed, I believe that a critical mindset is necessary to discover the truth about any religious tradition. Here we must be humble, of course. Understanding comes before criticism. Yet to be fair to a tradition, instead of hiding our critique behind a mask of objectivity, it is better to openly criticize a religion, understanding that our own criticism is based on relative standards and is not itself absolute. Our criticism is also subject to critique and response. In fact, one hopes that such a dialogue can result from the careful study of religious traditions. But this critical dialogue can only take place in an open and fair way when the other intellectual virtues I have mentioned are in place. The need for critical reflection on our beliefs may, in consort with all of our intellectual duties and virtues, lead to a re-consideration of the whole notion of “objectivity” in a more adequate way.

The myth of a purely scientific and objective approach to religion has distorted scholarship long enough. It has served as a mask to shield us from criticism, to delude ourselves and others, to confuse us as

^{18[18]} I have argued this point in my paper, “Religion and Science in Christian Perspective” which I read at the first Peking University Symposium in philosophy and religious studies (1994). A Chinese translation of this essay is, I understand, forthcoming. For a similar argument, in English, see my essay, “The Mutuality of Theology and Science,” Christian Scholar’s Review 26 (1996), 12-35.

to the character of the historical method and the certainty of our historical results. My worldview and your worldview can be just as “scientific” as another scholar's. In our post-modern situation, progress will only be made when we each embrace and understand our own faith-stance, stake our claim in the public and pluralistic marketplace of ideas, and give what reasons, evidence and arguments we can for our conclusions. My plea, then, is this: let us take off the mask of pure objectivity, and speak to each other face to face.

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