We are all institutionalized: Three works to challenge the conceit of a generically ‘academic’ study of religion

Johannes Wolfart
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Abstract: This essay encounters and considers together three very different recent works by scholars of religion, each one with strong Canadian connections: Maureen Matthews, Aaron Hughes and Donald Wiebe. The primary purpose, however, is to illuminate more broadly the importance of institutional dynamics in the formation and operation of the academic study of religion (i.e., not just in Canada). This stands in contrast to a well-established pattern of debating supposedly loftier questions of naming, disciplinary identity, idealized mandates and limits, etc. Furthermore, this essay suggests that scale of investigation matters – with a local, single-institution study revealing more, perhaps, about how we really do our work than either national or transnational efforts. In the end, reading these three books together suggests a tremendous diversity, including dynamic institutional diversity, in academic approaches to religion: scientific and non-scientific (predictably) but also, disciplined or expert and non-expert or academic administrative. Thus, the essay enjoins readers to take seriously a distinction between domains of ‘distributive’ and ‘concentrated’ expertise within the academy (e.g., Religious Studies versus, say, Civil Engineering), as well as the development of patterns of ‘altero-piety’ across the expert/nonexpert divide. In the end, such murky institutional dynamics appear to be shaping and impelling our field from the local institutional level (e.g., at the University of Winnipeg as documented by Matthews) to the transnational institutional level (e.g., in the International Association for the History of Religions as documented by Wiebe). Ultimately, one must conclude that stipulating that Religious Studies entail the academic study of religion is meaningless. ‘The academy’ is no more universal and unique (sui generis?) than ‘religion’ itself. Rather, academic institutions are diverse and particular;
and yet a variety of factors, ranging from deep colonial histories to the current global political economy of postsecondary higher education, all work to conceal the importance of the institutional basis of Religious Studies. Put another way (and pace Jonathan Z Smith): religion certainly is a creation of the scholar’s study — yet, far from imagining this scholar’s study as a place set apart (as it were), we must start imagining it as a historical, social and institutional location. That would take us one small but further step towards the all-important goal of disciplinary ‘reflexivity’.

Résumé : Cet essai présente et examine trois travaux récents et très différents de spécialistes de la religion, chacun ayant des liens étroits avec le Canada : Maureen Matthews, Aaron Hughes et Donald Wiebe. Le premier objectif est de mettre en lumière de façon générale l’importance de la dynamique institutionnelle dans la formation et le fonctionnement de l’étude universitaire de la religion (c’est-à-dire pas seulement au Canada). Cela contraste avec un modèle bien établi de débats sur des questions soi-disant plus nobles, comme la dénomination, l’identité disciplinaire, les mandats et les limites idéalisés, etc. En outre, cet essai suggère que l’échelle d’investigation a de l’importance - une étude locale, menée par une seule institution, en révèle peut-être davantage sur la façon dont nous faisons réellement notre travail que des études nationales ou transnationales. Enfin, lire ces trois livres ensemble suggère une énorme diversité, incluant une diversité institutionnelle dynamique, dans les approches universitaires de la religion : scientifiques et non scientifiques (comme on pouvait s’y attendre), mais aussi disciplinaires ou expertes et non expertes ou administratives. Ainsi, l’essai enjoint les lecteurs à prendre au sérieux la distinction entre les domaines d’expertise "distributive " et " concentrée " au sein de l’université (par exemple, les études religieuses par rapport au génie civil), ainsi que le développement de modèles d’« altéropïété » à travers la division expert/non expert. En fin de compte, ces dynamiques institutionnelles obscures semblent façonner et influencer notre domaine, du niveau institutionnel local (par exemple, à l’Université de Winnipeg, comme le montre Matthews) au niveau institutionnel transnational (par exemple, au sein de l’Association internationale pour l’histoire des religions, comme le montre Wiebe). Ultimement, il faut conclure que stipuler que les études religieuses impliquent l’étude universitaire de la religion n’a aucun sens. L’"académie" n’est pas plus universelle et unique (sui generis ?) que la "religion" elle-même. Au contraire, les institutions universitaires sont diverses et particulières ; et pourtant une variété de facteurs, allant d’histoires coloniales profondes à l’économie politique mondiale actuelle de l’enseignement supérieur postsecondaire, travaille à dissimuler l’importance de la base institutionnelle des études religieuses. En d’autres termes (et pace Jonathan Z Smith) : la religion est certainement une création de l’étude du chercheur - cependant, loin d’imaginer l’étude de ce chercheur comme un lieu à part (pour ainsi dire), nous devons commencer à l’imaginer comme un lieu historique, social et institutionnel. Cela nous permettrait de faire un petit pas de plus vers l’objectif primordial de la "réflexivité" disciplinaire.
Keywords
academic study of religion, colonialism, disciplinary expertise, Hughes, institutional diversity, institutional histories, Matthews, political economy of higher education, Wiebe

Mots clés
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Naamiwan’s Drum: The Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinaabe Artefacts
Maureen Matthews, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2016. XI + 325 pp.

From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada
Aaron W Hughes, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2020. XIII + 231 pp.

An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion: The Controversy at Delphi
Donald Wiebe, Toronto: Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion, 2021. XXVI + 345 pp.

This article considers three works by scholars with strong Canadian connections on topics with strong Canadian connections. Therefore, some readers may be inclined to approach this essay as a celebration of the richness of Canadian scholarships on religion. This would be a mistake. It should be stated at the outset that this essay is not intended as an exercise to promote Canadian content. It is, rather, intended as an exploration of the effects of particular and diverse institutional formations on the study of religion. Furthermore, it considers differences within recent scholarship in terms of how both general conceptions of – and widespread sensitivities to – religion, as well as Religious Studies the discipline, operate within institutions. The basic conclusion is that, methodologically speaking, the scale of investigation matters. Thus, fine-grained and single-institution study is able to reveal influential dynamics and mechanisms that the national multi-institution study cannot. The latter, though it makes a strong case for the utility of an overarching national perspective, tends to reinforce established stereotypes and myths about the emergence of Religious Studies, in Canada as an example. On a final introductory note: it is remarkable that two of the three monographs under consideration here come from the same press, UofT Press. They could not have been less alike – in approach, in style and quality of production, in effective “quality”. Ultimately, as all three of the works under consideration show, scholarly communication and publication (“dissemination” in Aaron Hughes’s terminology) is a key institutional pillar of Religious Studies.

Introduction to the three scholars and their works
Maureen Matthews is currently an investigative reporter and documentary maker for CBC and a curator at the Manitoba Museum. She is also a trained anthropologist with a doctorate from the University of Oxford. Her book narrates the interactions between three key agent-actors in the late 1990s early 2000s: Anishinaabe artefacts deemed to be living beings in certain key respects; members of a community located at Pauingassi,
Manitoba, whose recent ancestors made and used these artefacts, often for ceremonial purposes; and members of the University of Winnipeg, some of whom once purchased these artefacts for the collection of the university museum in the early 1970s, and some of whom then acted to “repatriate” these artefacts in the late 1990s. What is important for this essay is that these repatriation efforts demonstrate the power of academic institutions, as well as the assumptions their agents commonly make about religion. A key part of the story as Maureen Matthews tells it is that the university mistakenly repatriated some Pauingassi artefacts to an American-based cultural revival organization without proper deliberation and without keeping complete records (in Matthews’s term, they did this “secretly”). The university thereby violated both long-standing best practices in museology, as well as the policies and procedures of the university and, very likely, national and international laws governing the transport of such artefacts. They did this, it seems, in the misguided belief that this was the right thing to do because the artefacts were “sacred” and because demands for repatriation were coming from the Three Fires Midewiwin Society, a high-profile spiritual and political organization with powerful local connections in Winnipeg. In a certain sense, then, university officials were acting “religiously” or “piously”. A key part of the story as Maureen Matthews doesn’t tell it, is that the University of Winnipeg was at that time home to a small but established Religious Studies department (now called Religion and Culture). Members of that department do not appear at all in her narrative; still, it is a more-than-reasonable speculation that members of that department would have had important things to say about the university’s ascription/detection of sacredness to/in certain artefacts (but, as Matthews points out, not to/in others), or about the university’s identification of legitimate recipients for repatriated ceremonial objects, or about the contextual relations between religion and law, etc. The judgements of scholars with expertise in religion would likely have been “scientific” in the broadest sense. The point is this: mistakes were made in decisions that entailed complex and discerning judgments about languages of sacredness, social power derived therefrom, and the legitimate religious authorities recognized by, or in, particular communities. Instead, university agents simply performed cliché pieties in accordance with stereotypes of indigenous religion and cloaked their inexpert decisions in secrecy. Apparently, they chose not to consult specialists within the university whose collective expertise consists in locating the lines dividing the complexities of lived religion in socio-political contexts, on the one hand, from easy, generic pieties, on the other hand. One early conclusion to draw is that there is a particular challenge with the notion of “scholarly expertise” in the study of religion, quite apart from the more familiar “insider–outsider” or “emic–etic” distinction. Thus, it seems that some fields – say, Religious Studies or Gender Studies or Architectural Design – enjoy academic existence in sharp contrast to those enjoyed by, say, Civil Engineering or Internal Medicine. That is, expertise in religion seems to follow a principle of institutional distribution – everybody considers themselves to be a little bit expert. Other fields, however, follow the rule of institutional concentration of expertise – very few people outside of the field would dare even comment on, much less adjudicate, problems arising in civil engineering or internal medicine. Indeed, in the academic administration of such fields universities commonly defer to outside professional
accreditation bodies rather than collegial governing bodies, on the assumption that expertise resides only amongst disciplinary specialists.

Aaron Hughes currently holds a chair in Jewish Studies at the University of Rochester. For much of the 2000s, however, he taught in Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, in his home province of Alberta. He has published widely on both Judaism and Islam, as well as on Jewish–Muslim relations, including on the manifold ways such relations play out in shaping the academic study of religion. Furthermore, Hughes was until recently a long-serving editor of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* and has participated in some high-profile methodological debates in Islamic Studies. On first glance, therefore, it might seem odd that such a scholar – concerned with philosophy and intellectual tradition in Judaism and Islam – should undertake to write an “institutional history” (as per the book’s subtitle). One would be wrong, however, to consider this work as an expatriate’s pious obligation to his homeland. Rather, Hughes is here pursuing two preoccupations long established in his scholarship: (i) origins narratives, esp. in relation to the “Middle Ages”, following the formative periods of major religious “traditions”; and (ii) the difficult dynamics that develop between close relative cultures. Thus, that interplay of affinity and difference, often narrativized as historical processes of divergence, and which Hughes is accustomed to seeing in medieval Jewish–Muslim relations, is here projected through a set of prisms, as it were, to become (i) the close-separateness of American and Canadian universities, especially in relation to (ii) the ever-murky difference between theology and the study of religion as academic pursuits, which Hughes further differentiates according to major regions of Canada: the Maritimes, central Canada (including the English-language but excluding the French-language scene in Quebec), the Prairies and the West coast. The result is a story that far exceeds expectations shaped by prior experience with institutional university histories. Hughes’s tale of Religious Studies in Canada is surprisingly engaging and complex; it is also somewhat selective, idiosyncratic and problematic. One helpful early conclusion to draw from Hughes’s work, however, conforms to what is observed in Matthews’s work, namely: that the history of our field is a history of struggle to establish credible expertise for dedicated students of religion in the academy. While Hughes’s book appears framed primarily in terms of the well-worn theology-versus-religious studies dichotomy (and indeed, in some ways the high visibility of this particular framing is unfortunate), he also engages in some very subtle accounting for the differences between the discipline Religious Studies, on the one hand, and disciplinary ancestor fields like Biblical Studies and Oriental Studies, on the other hand. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, it identifies a largely undiagnosed problem in the composition of many university departments of Religious Studies – especially smaller ones – in Canada, in which such distinctions are not drawn, and colleagues therefore struggle to cooperate. Secondly, Hughes’s insistence on the difference between Religious Studies and these close cognate fields is a significant move in the direction of concentrated expertise, and away from troublesome (as amply demonstrated by Matthews’s account) distributive expertise in religion in Canadian universities.

Donald Wiebe’s long career as a scholar of religion, a proponent of the scientific study of religion in the academy, as an organizer of two congresses of the IAHR in Canada (Winnipeg in 1980 and Toronto in 2010) and, not least, as a contributor to this
journal at important junctures in the history of our field, requires little introduction here. For most of his career, Wiebe has operated from the University of Toronto, from Trinity College (where he long held the position of Dean of Divinity), and from what was once the Center for the Study of Religion – now integrated to Department for the Study of Religion – (which he co-directed, and where he helped train many graduate students now in faculty positions in Canada and the United States). Before that he was at the University of Manitoba (but never, as Hughes states [146], at Brandon University). Of the three works considered here, only Donald Wiebe’s book treats the discipline of Religious Studies on a global scale (arguably), since it concerns recent developments in the IAHR, the institution representing practitioners of “history of religion” (Religionswissenschaft) internationally; at the same time, Wiebe’s book is the most personal work of the three. The book chronicles and documents (also reproducing various documents by other scholars, including adversaries of the author) Wiebe’s interactions with members of the executive committee of the IAHR during the planning phase for the twenty-second quinquennial congress that was to be held at the University of Otago in Dunedin, NZ in 2020, but which was eventually cancelled due to the pandemic. As an organizer of two prior IAHR congresses (in 1980 and 2010) and as an honorary life member of the IAHR, Wiebe was one of a handful of similarly qualified senior members of the IAHR invited to join the executive committee in an “extended executive committee” in Delphi, Greece in September 2019. At the broadest level these meetings were called to discuss the past, present and future of the IAHR, discussions that eventually crystalized around the near-perennial question of the name of the organization and the possibility of a name-change (dropping “history” in favor of either “scientific study” or just “study” of religion). In more practical terms, discussion hinged on programming for the Congress, especially in light of member complaints – and not for the first time – that some presentations at the 2015 Congress held in Erfurt, Germany departed from the IAHR’s mandate, which excludes confessional or apologetic undertakings. The outcome of the Delphi meetings did not accord with Wiebe’s well-known position on practices he deems cryptotheological (his account abounds in intimations of compromised procedure and conspiratorial practice) and so he resigned his life membership in the IAHR in what he calls a “performative act”. However, that is unlikely to be the end of the matter. Since the Otago meeting was cancelled, the recommendations of the Delphi group cannot go to a membership vote before the next meeting in 2025. Therefore, the debate continues. An early account of the Delphi discussions by Wiebe was published in the pages of the journal Method and Theory in the Study of Religion; to this account IAHR executive committee members Tim Jensen (President) and Satoko Fujiwara (Acting Secretary General) have added a published rejoinder.1 A programmatic proposal for the direction of the IAHR presented at Delphi by Ann Taves (Deputy Secretary General) has now also been published, but an earlier version of that text is included in this volume.2
The importance of being institutional

Very soon it will be 40 years since Jonathan Z. Smith’s quotable quote to the effect that “[r]eligion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study…” first appeared in print. Smith’s rejection of religion as a \textit{sui generis} object of study has been tested since 1982, but it has also enjoyed some reinforcing refinements. For example, in a recent response to Majid Daneshgar’s \textit{Studying the Qur’an in the Muslim Academy} (2020), Sajjad Rizvi has identified ways in which one might locate more precisely Smith’s now-fabled scholar’s study: historically, geographically, ideologically, etc.\textsuperscript{3} More than that, though, Rizvi has clarified the religion scholar’s “positionality” in relation to other users and uses of “religion” across the insider/outsider divide, both theologically and non-theologically, and so forth. Rizvi asks: “what is, therefore, positionality but an explicit placing of one’s historical contingency at the heart of one’s experiential inquiry?” (123).

In other words: \textit{it’s complicated}. Such complication, moreover, seems destined to confound scholars of religion who, while they now widely accept religion as inherently plural and particular, still consider real scholarship about religion to be singular and universal.

Indeed, most scholars now concede considerable \textit{objective} internal diversity of generic religion as actual, on-the-ground religions (note the plural); this is true, even, of diehard comparativists who rely on generic religion, and of vanguard advocates of cognitive and evolutionary approaches. Still, our collective consciousness of the \textit{subjective} disciplinary diversity of what was once called religious studies (note the plural) has over the last decades been considerably constrained and diminished by the widespread adoption of a term connoting the uniform and singular “academic study of religion” – and this despite strong early warnings about the shortcomings of this approach.\textsuperscript{4} Certainly, the paradigm seems to project two conceits almost everybody in the field recognizes as false, or at least highly problematic: one study of one generic religion. What remains largely unexamined, let alone unchallenged, is the radical simplicity of institutional form implied by the \textit{academic} mode of study – as if, indeed, “the academy” existed on the order of \textit{noumenon} (who hasn’t heard it thus invoked at departmental meetings?). The trickiness of the problem may be illuminated by returning to the above example: Sajjad Rizvi rejects Bruce Lincoln’s famous central proprietary claim over religion by the academy, for which the formulation “History of Religion” served as an emblem (Lincoln’s first thesis). Instead, Rizvi argues for scholarly aspirations which are \textit{pluriversal} and \textit{interversal} rather than universal (130), and for a concomitant “provincialization of the European gaze” (131). Yet, at the same time, he also reasserts the academy in terms of a minimal academic diversity at best, juxtaposing the “Western academy” and the “Muslim academy” (128, 129). To be fair, Rizvi is at great pains to move beyond simple binaries, to eschew polemical inversions of the civilizations model, or rhetorical weaponizations of Edward Said’s “orientalism”, and the like. It is clearly very difficult, however, to move through or beyond the universalizing language of “the academy”. To be fair, also, the universalizing tendency of academic discourse (i.e., what academics say about “the academy”) is perpetually and further encouraged by the self-advertisement of individual colleges and universities all over the globe, to the effect that they each represent and uphold
common and universal standards – in course and degree requirements, in hiring practices, in granting of tenure and promotion, awarding of titles, etc.

Therefore, for a host of reasons ranging from historical colonialism to the contemporary global political economy of postsecondary education, suggestions that particular and diverse institutional formations play a role in academic knowledge creation in general, and in the academic study of religion in particular, are commonly met with responses ranging from polite knowing smiles to dismissive and derisive phrases of the “inside baseball” or “dirty laundry” or “navel-gazing” variety (that happens to be my experiential reality!). In other words, investigating academic histories, practices, discourses, etc. as bona fide phenomena warranting serious inquiry is still considered a second-tier intellectual pursuit, at best. Yet this seems more than strange in this very age, one in which many other venerable public institutions – one is drawn to think immediately of those providing healthcare or policing and public safety – are being scrutinized so carefully for their peculiar structural, systemic and institutional characteristics. For this reason, especially, the work of the three authors considered here should be welcomed by all working religionists: because they each illuminate key institutional aspects that have shaped academic studies of religions.

Indeed, the primary purpose of this essay is to urge careful consideration of the meaning or significance of the specifically academic study of religion. How does it differ from such formulations, considerations, representations of religion as issue from other institutional contexts – say, those subject to direct government mandate, or those shaped by private corporate interests, or those propelled by the force of mediaspheric chatter? Moreover, considering these three works together may accomplish something beyond identifying academic institutional complexity and diversity in its influence on the study of religion. Therefore, it is also the intention here to illustrate the importance of scale – local, national and transnational – in assessing the institutional dynamics of the academic study of religion. To emphasize that scalar dimension of institutional dynamics, the essay will proceed from the study of the smallest-scale institutional view, to that considering the academic institutional formation of the greatest reach or extent – much as a camera “crane shot” might transition from a horizontal macro-perspective on the life in one meadow to an aerial view of an entire mountain range.

Some detailed and comparative considerations

The titular and central character of Matthews’s account is a water drum made and used by a man named Naamiwan, whose role in the ceremonial life of Pauingassi was documented – including photographically – by the American anthropologist Irving Hallowell in the 1930s. The drum, like other objects no longer in active use by the people of Pauingassi, was at one point retired to the bush, where it would have been expected to decay in dignified repose. However, in the early 1970s, an anthropology professor from the University of Winnipeg, Jack Steinbring, purchased a large number of such objects from individuals at Pauingassi and moved them to museum storage at his university. According to Matthews, when Naamiwan’s grandson Omishoosh visited the University of Winnipeg in 1995, he recognized his grandfather’s drum amongst the more than 100 Pauingassi objects held by the museum. Then, in 1998, the drum was one of about 80
ceremonial objects – “artefacts . . . subject to the professional scientific gaze” (18) – that university officials quietly transferred to the control of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge based in Wisconsin. According to Matthews, “in almost every way, what happened between the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge and the University of Winnipeg is the antithesis of an ideal repatriation” (23). In the end, thanks to efforts by Paugingassi people, including Omishoosh’s son and grandson (Namiwaan’s great-great-grandson), as well as the efforts of Matthews and some academic colleagues in Winnipeg, the drum and other objects were returned to the community at Paugingassi. They now reside at the Manitoba Museum, where people from Paugingassi visit and care for them.

Matthews is meticulous in framing the complicated narrative of the drum’s movements, and especially the failure of agents of the University of Winnipeg to recognize or appreciate the manifold enduring bonds between the Pauingassi people and the material culture – especially the ceremonial objects – of their ancestors. Because these bonds exist in accordance with a worldview and via logics that are broadly “religious”, readers of this journal should find much that is both familiar and challenging throughout Matthews’s account. For example, her consideration of the animacy of objects revisits a foundational “datum” in the emergence of Religious Studies as a discipline. She does so knowingly and with explicit reference to EB Tylor’s use of precisely such ethnographic “data” in the development of his theories. Here, Matthews’s also joins long-running debates about such animacy as a linguistic phenomenon (i.e., in terms of linguistic gender), as well as considering other salient aspects of language, such as the pragmatic feature of “discreet speech” in Ojibwe. Her conclusion, simply put, is that university administrators misunderstood complex cultural beliefs in Pauingassi concerning either the living nature of particular objects or their larger supernatural contexts. They might be forgiven their failure; as Matthews shows, these cultural beliefs – as all cultural systems – are complex and non-intuitive to outsiders. Thus, apparently arbitrary linguistic gender distinctions in Ojibwe – say between animate raspberries and inanimate strawberries – are also endowed by Ojibwe speakers with metaphorical meanings: raspberries possess the agency of thorny self-defense, whereas strawberries do not. Yet, the raspberries’ linguistic animacy only makes them potentially live actors. To clarify her point, Matthews returns to Irving Hallowell’s observations on the animacy of stones, as explained to him by Naamiwan himself. The “living” nature of stones, it turns out, is a powerful principle. This is exemplified by both widespread belief in stones combining certain physical and social characteristics – as so-called “grandfather stones” – as well as the widespread belief in stone/cliff inhabiting anthropomorphic supernatural beings called Memegwesiwag. Yet, as Hallowell discovered, only some stones are alive. Or, generically speaking, stones are alive some of the time. Yet, the linguistic animacy of stones does not represent a general or universal principle, or quality of innate stone-being. Instead, stones are alive in their relationships to other living beings, including human beings, a characteristic that Matthews identifies as “social”. Thus, also, Matthews suggests an interesting theoretical framework in which such objects that are real and living in a manner contingent on the functionality of their social relations (following Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell) are termed “dividuals” (following Marilyn Strathern), to signal their unstable or fractal identities (a problem addressed, otherwise, in some, but not all, Christian theologies).
The mistaken actions of the agents of the University of Winnipeg, then, find one explanation in their deficient understanding of how objects could be at once alive and not alive: when they demanded pointblank whether certain objects were alive, they got complex and non-committal answers, which they chose to take as negative responses. For the people from Pauingassi, they concluded, these objects were dead. This impression was apparently compounded by the practice of “discreet speech”, which means that highly qualified Ojibwe speakers are disinclined to answer a direct question with a direct answer under any circumstances; under charged circumstances or on delicate subjects, discreet speech conventions normally issue in something like evasion. In other words, the people from Pauingassi were not disposed to make it easy for university officials to understand the meaning of these objects (and why should they?). University officials, for their part, instead of opting for expert translation or interpretation, fell back on the well-established taxonomical difference between “sacred” and “profane” objects, concluding that the absence of pious demonstrations signaled religious indifference. (In other words, they upped the ante of basic Tylor with garden-variety Durkheim.) Thus, when Naamiwan’s grandson Omishoosh visited the university museum in the 1990s, certain objects which the museum classified as “sacred” were kept from him altogether. The presumptions of the university were further justified by their observation that many people at Pauingassi had adopted missionary Christianity, which officials considered incompatible with other, traditional cultural understandings (the manifold assumptions underlying this view are beyond the range of this essay). Thus, when members of the Three Fires Midewiwin society approached the university, speaking the university’s language of sacred–profane dichotomies, and expressing pieties in a manner not at all discreet, officials were eagerly responsive. Furthermore, the Three Fires Lodge’s own “traditional legitimacy” was established largely in relative terms, via the suggestion that Pauingassi’s involvement with Christianity had displaced “authentic” indigenous spirituality (even the word “religion” can be suspect, of course) amongst its inhabitants. In sum, university officials entirely circumvented the boggy terrain of insider–outsider conversation and chose, instead, to exercise what one might call “altero-piety”, making self-authorizing decisions in alleged respect of others and in accordance with crude stereotypes of indigenous religion – not that Pauingassi’s claims would have been entirely incomprehensible or unrecognizable in “-etic” terms. Matthews’s meticulous attention to culture and language, including the socio-linguistic discreet speech rule, her exhaustive historical and archival research into the scholarly legacies of Hollowell and Steinbring, and her uncanny knack for understanding institutional dynamics (after all, she has first-hand knowledge of the CBC, as well as several provincial universities and museums) amply demonstrate that scholarly rigour can serve both scientific and activist aims.

Perhaps Matthews’ most significant potential contribution to our field derives from the fact that she is not from the discipline of Religious Studies per se. It is cheering, in a certain sense, to see that struggles against stereotypes of religion, against adept/inert performances of politically salient altero-piety, against powerful community agents, and the like, are all shared by a scholar in another discipline. It is a relief – tinged with regret – to see that the basic problem identified by Matthews (scientifically vapid but institutionally powerful pieties) as well as the solution she demonstrates (painfully cautious scholarship, scientific in its methodology) are each familiar as well. Indeed,
perhaps the highpoint of her work from the point of view of religionists is her reliance on the social anthropology of the late Alfred Gell, who adapted the concept of “methodological atheism” to “methodological philistinism” – his way of establishing as a methodological principle the avoidance of all value judgments across cultures. In a nutshell: for getting things done, agents armed with the double-barrels of complex institution and simplistic ideology are best; for getting things right, however, executive trigger-pulling is no match in the long run for puzzling things out carefully. This, finally, is the lesson religionists may draw from Matthews’s book: interdisciplinarity at the level of methodological intersection or convergence may be both powerful (intellectually) and empowering (politically and emotionally). Yet, superficial borrowing/sharing of platitudes and pieties under the guise of interdisciplinarity are likely far more common, because academic institutions run on them – these latter are the institutional, rather than disciplinary, currency of “the academy”. In our age of coming transformations, especially, one would do well to mistrust sympathetic and un-scientific actors who profess the best intentions. Inasmuch as altero-piety has now been institutionalized as a preferred practice in all/most Canadian universities, there is danger all around . . . especially when fully informed, deliberative processes – admittedly, slow and cumbersome – are widely seen as a natural enemy of action, including right action.

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Aaron Hughes, much like Maureen Matthews, details the diversity and complexity of academic institutions, and especially the uneven distribution of expertise or competence within them. Hughes also professes to eschew a simple, essentializing dichotomy between things secular and religious. One of the distinctly salutary outcomes of his approach is the departure from well-worn tendencies to frame the entire history of Religious Studies as an undifferentiated enterprise (in contrast to Rizvi’s “Western academy”), impelled exclusively by colonialism. Thus, Hughes insists that, in historical terms, “Religion is [was?] thus imagined, constructed, and situated in specific national frames of reference” (4). Therefore, he claims to be pitching his story for broader – i.e. beyond Canadian – audiences precisely because the development of Religious Studies in Canada is not the same as it is in the United States (his repetition of the point that landmark US supreme court decisions do not enact church–state separation in Canada is a bit wearying). Moreover, Hughes claims, the Canadian story may be taken as “exemplary” and that such work on a national scale has not yet been done (6). Like Matthews, therefore, Hughes sees his scholarship as issuing in a kind of case study of the institutionalization of ideas about “religion”. His stated goal “is to write an important chapter in the history of Canada and, more generally, in the history of religions” (8). These Hughes sees as related in the following manner. None of the key late-nineteenth-century developments leading towards the academic study of religion originated in Canada; they were all, according to Hughes, “imported from abroad, be it England, Germany, or the United States. What is significant is the reception these methods received in Canadian institutions . . .” (67, emphasis in original).

Hughes offers eight chapters (apart from Introduction and Conclusion). The first and the last are called “Inauspicious Beginnings” and “Florescence”, respectively – a fair indication of the dominant narrative arc of triumphalism described by this work, to which we will return. Between these one finds a chapter on the University of Toronto
which Hughes terms a “case study”. This is followed by a chapter on Victorian scholarship and its influence in Canadian higher education more broadly, which offers some interesting biographical sketches of important personalities (but without Lytton Strachey’s legendary sharpness – therefore, it is probably better not to think of them as “eminent Canadians”). This is followed by a chapter on Westward expansion (the index contains an entry for the Canadian Pacific Railway immediately preceding the entry for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion); this is followed by a chapter called “Battle Lines”. Together, these chapters, according to Hughes, examine “the diverse [Canadian] institutional settings in which knowledge about religion was produced” (100). After these institutional accounts of individual universities, Hughes offers what is possibly the most interesting chapter in the book, on national institutions of scholarly publication, or “Venues of Dissemination”. This treats the history of scholarly publication in our field in Canada, from the 1920s to the present. It also encapsulates a weakness of the whole book: while it tells a good story, it is not a true story. Hughes claims that the late 20th century saw a “paradigm shift […] from religious to secular and historical study” and that scholarly publication was thus a harbinger of coming institutional transformation: “the study of religion would now shift from the religious seminary to the secular university” (129). The problem – if only for Hughes’s story – is that even after the Canadian Journal of Theology was reborn as the current Studies in Religion/Science Religieuse, the latter remained substantially theological (and orientated towards Christian theologies), both in its contents as well as in its official mandate.

Any comparison of the works of Matthews and Hughes would have to begin with the issue of scale. It seems that a case study of a single academic institution, such as the University of Winnipeg, reveals how actors can create institutional power by construing “religion” stereotypically. Thus, Matthews is able to restore a certain power to scholarship on religion, which is why her work comes across so powerfully – a tour de force. By contrast, Hughes’s ambitious coverage of many diverse institutions actually reinscribes established stereotypes. In this way certain aspects of his work have more in common with the executive conjuring of university administrators than with Matthews’s careful diagnostic thinking. Strangely, Hughes appears especially naïve as regards terms already notorious for their ideological and rhetorical histories. Thus, he relies heavily on the troublesome notion of the “secular” – by which he seems to mean by turns institutional independence from ecclesiastical control, as well as some more elusive attitude or non-religious philosophical spirit (however, at any given moment one is never quite sure which). The most obvious difficulties of this terminology Hughes tries to dodge with the formulation “more secular religious studies”, which he has emerging “out of theology” (3, emphasis added). Yet, he also insists that “theology did not simply morph into secular [religious] studies” (94). Matters are further obscured by Hughes’s frequent confusions of “secular” with “non-denominational”, which may explain his conclusion that the University of Toronto was secular from the outset: “…the secular University of Toronto formed out of the ashes of King’s [College]” (51). Elsewhere, he repeats the dubious claim that when the Baldwin Act of 1849 reconstituted the University of Toronto from King’s College under state control, this marked UofT’s “complete secularization” (44). In sum, Hughes’s account lacks clarity and precision on a central point. The implicit (at best) acknowledgement of certain indeterminacies – many things in his account
ultimately appear as secular-ish or religious-ish – cannot measure against Matthews’s explicit theoretical engagement with the problem of unstable identities of persons or objects in social exchange. Finally, on a different but conceptually related point: Hughes’s observation that the border between the United States and Canada is a “fluid” one is puzzling – to my understanding any residual fluidity in the otherwise long-fixed long border was settled by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909; perhaps he meant that the border remains permeable to academic and other cultural influences.

All of this raises the question: if the secular–religious dichotomy is so troublesome – and widely acknowledged by experts to be so – why does it figure so prominently in Hughes’s account? The reason is simple: the secular–religious dichotomy is necessitated by the basic narrative framing of Hughes’s account as progress from one condition to the other. As indicated by the title, this is a story of institutional secularization. Occasional renunciations of teleology notwithstanding (13, 94, as above), Hughes’s diachronic representations clearly posit secular Religious Studies as some superior developmental stage (i.e., as arising from the ashes). Thus, in fact, the narrative is baldly teleological in a way long decried by scholars such as Jonathan Z Smith as “our pallid version of that tattered legend of the origins of science.”6 This is no small thing. For example, when Hughes considers “what would eventually emerge as Queen’s University” he appears to be looking forward but is, in fact, working backward from one university that did emerge out of a theological college – a very selective datum. There is no mention here of the many, many theological colleges that did not turn into secular universities (most of them simply faded away again, some of them became parts of Canada’s university system, and some of them are still theological colleges); nor is there any mention of later public university foundations, or recent confessional university foundations (on which more, below). What we have here is not so much a subtle diachronic explanation of the historical interactions between institutional Theology and institutional Religious Studies, as an origins myth for the latter.

Hughes displays a similar tolerance for hoary “grand narrative” as he tracks the east-to-west “progress” of the nation, from Jacques Cartier’s first landing to the present. Of course, colonial missionary establishments are important in both the broader history of Canada, as well in the shaping of various universities – but very different ones mattered in different times and places, especially if one wants to account for things historically. For example, anybody familiar with the British Columbian past will notice that while Jacques Cartier might now matter there mythologically, in historical terms it was nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox missionaries or American expansionist politicians armed with the doctrine of manifest destiny who shaped the complicated patchwork of confessional educational institutions in that province – certainly, these were at least as important as what had happened on the other coast one or two centuries earlier. Such local conditions might be considered essential background to the story Hughes does tell with great skill: the campaign to reconstitute British Columbia’s leading public university, UBC, in the middle twentieth century such that teaching about religion was possible within the university, even while the teaching of religion was not.

Otherwise, however, Hughes’s pursuit of the big picture on a national scale also draws him to historiographical caricature, rather than subtle analysis. This is exactly what makes Hughes’s judgments similar to those dismantled by Matthews: on closer
inspection they are flat-out mistaken, and perhaps also pernicious. For example, taken together, Hughes’s occasional nods in the direction of colonial and missionary histories ring rather hollow and academically self-centered. Indeed, Hughes seems surprisingly unprepared to reverse the colonial gaze when he flags “an issue that plagues the early history of the study of religion in Canada, namely, its investiture in colonialism and the denigration of Aboriginal traditions in the New World” (23). One might well ask: who suffered/suffers the plagues – actual and metaphoric – of colonialization and colonialism? Unfortunately, this is not an isolated lapse. In a later chapter, Hughes states: “nineteenth-century Canada was largely wilderness” – which he clarifies with the claim that “the C[anadian] P[acific] R[ailway] was instrumental in populating Western Canada” (73). Hughes’s persistence in the frameworks of European discovery and terra nullius leaves little doubt that occasional invocations of colonialism are both self-absorbed and self-absolving. His observation that in 1870 the people of Red River “rebelled” under the leadership of Louis Riel – an episode now widely recognized as but one phase in an ongoing conflict between a non-state nation (the Métis) and a non-nation state (the Dominion of Canada) – is also consistent with such antiquated frameworks of Canadian nationalist historiography.

In other regards, however, Hughes’s narrative is very attentive to local conditions and particularities. In part, this is so because he relies so heavily on five regional state-of-the-art reviews published in the late 1980s and early 1990s (likely well-known to many readers of this journal). Since the book is billed as an overview, this reliance on secondary sources need not have been a problem (although the relative absence of original research is another contrast with Matthews’s work). Indeed, thanks to his re-engagement with many individual institutional and regional histories Hughes is able to locate and share historical tidbits that add texture and complexity to the basic narrative. For example, the story of vigorous but unsuccessful efforts to endow a Jewish college of the University of Manitoba – to have been called Maimonides College – challenges some received wisdom about the longue durée of Canadian educational institutions (or is it the exception that proves the rule of Christian hegemony?). Yet, unsurprisingly, trust in the regional auto-histories produced by Religious Studies scholars decades ago also reproduces some well-worn patterns of regional self-delusion, as well as distortions to the total Canadian picture. Thus, for example, Hughes repeats the old saw that the Eastern provinces (Maritimes to Ontario, plus the Anglophone institutions in Quebec) adopted what he calls the “Oxbridge system” (further specifically labelled “elitist”) for the establishment of post-secondary institutions, while the Western provinces adopted a model in imitation of American land-grant universities. This is a massive oversimplification. Not only was there no such thing as an “Oxbridge system” – as regards the teaching of theology/practice of Christianity, especially in relation to emerging “scientific” methods, Oxford and Cambridge were very different institutions – but other British universities, such as Edinburgh, also exerted influence on the Canadian scene. Furthermore, the contrast between Western and Eastern Canada was much less significant than is commonly claimed in these regional accounts. Thus, and as Hughes readily acknowledges, many Western institutions actually got their start as branch plants of Eastern ones (for example, UBC of McGill, or Brandon of McMaster). Moreover, the Western provincial universities were hardly well endowed to the extent that they could
claim independence from either ecclesial or legislative influence. Indeed, in 1932 the University of Manitoba lost its entire endowment to a long-term fraud perpetrated by a bursar who evaded detection for years largely because he was the nephew of the first Anglican Archbishop of Rupert’s Land! Of course, the so-called “Machray defalcation” put Manitoba in an extreme situation; yet, elsewhere too, the presence and influence of a great diversity of Christian communities – Mennonites, Scandinavian Lutherans, Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox, Francophone Catholics, quick-growing North American Pentecostal and Evangelical movements, to name but the obvious groups – all exerted considerable influence on the formation of university-based Religious Studies throughout Western Canada, including via the foundation of confessional colleges affiliated with most, if not all, Western Canadian universities.

This persistence of creaky historiographical frameworks is all the more regrettable, since Hughes has a very fine eye for detail that does much to trouble received narratives and established conceptions of Religious Studies. Thus, for example, his account of mid-nineteenth-century efforts to reestablish by provincial legislation rather than royal charter, and thereby effectively to “de-confessionalize” (my word), the institution now known as the University of New Brunswick (26) begs an obvious comparison to the “de-secularization” (again, my word) of the University of British Columbia by similar local legislative means a century later. Hughes’s observation, already mentioned, that the pursuits of Biblical Studies and Oriental Studies were significant forerunners of Religious Studies proper, but should be ultimately regarded as distinct, is likewise both illuminating and tantalizing (55). The fact that many universities – my own included – have been tending towards an institutional reintegration of these historically and methodologically distinct fields with Religious Studies, is undoubtedly problematic (especially for those of us who still think that “history of religion” should concern something other than a dialogue between imaginary original and ephemeral present states).

Ultimately, Hughes is absolutely correct that Religious Studies in Canada – or in any other national context – is fundamentally an institutional creature. He is correct also, that a thorough institutional history of Religious Studies in Canada would constitute a major contribution to scholarship. In the end, however, Hughes’s reliance on older individual institutional and/or regional histories made his task impossible. These sources are problematic not because most of their authors were also theologians or were otherwise religiously motivated in their scholarship; rather, they are unreliable because their efforts were exercises in disciplinary self-advertisement within particular institutional settings and regional/provincial politics. Nothing they say served any other purpose, and it is for that reason that one might consider them fundamentally “tendentious” or “unscientific”. In some significant way, Hughes took on an impossible task writing his history from such sources. He is right that a monograph covering the whole country is needed. It would have been better written on the basis of new research.

This returns us, finally, to the comparison with Matthews’s book. Her focus was as narrowly institutional as possible (micro-historical and “thick” à la Clifford Geertz); one might have hoped that Hughes’s national perspective would have been equally thorough in executing its stated aims. Unfortunately, it is not. First of all, as already indicated, tracking those institutions that appear to have completed the historical journey of “secularization” leaves the impression that theological colleges and other confessional
institutions are a thing of the past. They are not. Not only did some survive right alongside those that were de-confessionalized and secularized, but new confessional institutions have joined the scene, many as fully accredited universities. In some important instances university-trained scholars of religion now ply their trade in this Canadian context, for examples at Trinity Western University in BC or Canadian Mennonite University in Manitoba, or at Redeemer University in Ontario, or at Crandall University in New Brunswick. But a more significant omission in Hughes’s account is the absence of any sustained consideration of those institutions one might term – without prejudice – “second tier”. Officially, most of these are classed as “comprehensive” universities; since Hughes chose to consider certain Canadian universities in analog to British elite institutions, maybe these are our “red brick” universities? Like the British red bricks, many Canadian institutions were founded during the expansion of access to post-secondary education in the wake of World War II, and then developed rapidly to accommodate the baby boom generation. In many instances these new foundations grew somewhat in the shadows of older institutions in their cities and provinces; in many instances they were actually staffed in the first generation by graduates of the British “red bricks”. For the institutional development of Religious Studies in Canada this is germane, because the institutional cultures that developed in these places often combined a certain anti-establishment attitude or anti-elitist ethos with self-consciously left-wing – later, self-consciously progressive – politics, and a pragmatic approach to institutional structure that encouraged interdisciplinarity and not a few ad hoc arrangements (especially in graduate training). At the same time, these institutions were also especially sensitive to community support, both politically and financially. Where the study of religion was concerned, such community support often came from a place that was much more inclined to reverential attitudes or pious pursuits than were the institutions themselves. This produced a kind of inherent tension that was only exacerbated when, in recurring cycles of financial crisis, confessional colleges with strong community support were absorbed into these universities. This is the story of Religious Studies at such institutions as the University of Victoria, University of Regina, University of Winnipeg, York University, Carleton University, Concordia University – to name but some obvious ones. At all of these places the study of religion continues to happen subject to many of the local tensions and dynamics detailed by Matthews. At my own institution, for example, a small but vibrant Religious Studies program has long operated under the legal cover of the Carleton University Act (1957), which explicitly establishes a mandate deemed “non-sectarian” to be realized on an ongoing basis via processes of collegial self-governance in accordance with principles of academic freedom. Yet, in recent years, Religious Studies at Carleton has seen high-level attempts at interference – only occasionally rebuffed, alas – in curricular processes, promotions procedures, and even hiring procedures, all justified as responsibility (real or imagined) to stakeholder communities (real or imagined). Such struggles play out at the institutional level, but are replicated in many, many institutions across Canada, and represent – for better or for worse – a key dynamic of Religious Studies in Canada over the course of many decades. Alas, it is one which Hughes’s preoccupation with “elite” institutions becoming “more secular” hardly captures.
In one regard, Donald Wiebe’s latest book presents the kind of tempest-in-a-teapot academic infighting widely lampooned since the days of Erasmus of Rotterdam. In another regard, however, Wiebe’s book offers considerably more than an attempt to gain a wider audience for his version of events at Delphi, or his views on the scientific study of religion (which views he has made well-known for nearly a half century), or to get in last digs. Especially in conjunction with the other two works under consideration here, this book illuminates much about the state of our field in relation to broader academic institutional developments and cultural politics in recent decades. As stated at the outset, such institutional dynamics remain underappreciated in favor of more “idealist” conceptions of Religious Studies. Thus, interestingly, in the past Wiebe has preferred to describe himself as a philosopher of science. Here, however, he also reveals a well-developed sense of himself as an institutional actor engaged in the political performance of certain organizational roles.

The institutional history of the International Association for the History of Religions goes back to a meeting at Paris in 1900, but formal founding as a modern international/internationalist organization dedicated to the scientific study of religion (i.e., without apologetic bias or confessional intent) dates to the first post-WWII Congress, held at Amsterdam in 1950. From the very beginning, however, it seems that the scientific mandate was in danger of being subverted from within, so that the 1960 IAHR Congress held at Marburg adopted a statement, generally attributed to RJ Zwi Werblowsky, which included so-called “basic minimum presuppositions” for a scientific study of religion distinct from the practices, including intellectual practices (i.e., theology, confessional apologetics, ethical reasoning, etc.), internal to various religious cultures and traditions. In this same era of post-war reconstitution, the IAHR was also guided, however, by a more front-and-center commitment to internationalism, one that it signaled via, among other things, affiliation to United Nations bodies, especially UNESCO. This affiliation is not detailed by Wiebe to the same extent that he elaborates the Werblowsky statement. Nevertheless, it is clear that the founding internationalism of the IAHR remains important, both institutionally as well as ideologically, where it is now commonly expressed in the confusingly multivalent language of “globalization”. Moreover, while Werblowsky – and now Wiebe – insist that both mandates may be pursued concurrently, others have suggested that the strictly scientific mandate in fact limits international participation in the IAHR in decidedly non-random (i.e., patterned, geographically and culturally) ways, and has thus labelled loyal adherents to the Werblowsky position “exclusivist”.

Here, then, lies the crux of a bitter debate within the IAHR, and especially, it seems, between Wiebe and Ann Taves. For Wiebe, as for Werblowsky, the IAHR’s scientific mandate has always been key to its distinctiveness in relation to the many other academic professional organizations that accommodate non-scientific undertakings at national (e.g., Canadian Society for the Study of Religion), de facto multi-national (e.g., American Academy of Religion), and officially multi-national (e.g., European Academy of Religion) levels. Thus, Wiebe keeps returning to the importance of preserving the “scientific credentials” or “scientific reputation” of the IAHR. For Taves – and, presumably, others present at the Delphi meetings – such a restricted mandate has negative implications, both for methodological development in the field and in more mundane institutional terms. In the first instance, strict adherence to the Werblowsky statement is...
viewed as hindrance to the development of scholarships that Taves considers critical and/or rigorous in their approaches to religion, even without being empirical or otherwise traditionally social scientific. These, while they are not confessional or apologetic per se, are, nevertheless, “engaged” or “activist” in that they pursue cultural, social, environmental agendas. Wiebe sees Taves’s carefully drawn distinctions between overtly religious and secular-yet-non-scientific agendas as a distinction without a difference, whereas others apparently see this expansion of mandate as key to the future of the IAHR. It seems clear that a majority of those present at Delphi were persuaded that abandoning the narrow, “exclusivist” mandate would make IAHR affiliation attractive to a greater range of academic organizations from greater diversity of national/sub-national contexts around the world, which would, in turn, make the IAHR more competitive with AAR and similar “big tent” organizations in the hunt for membership dues, conference registrations, and the like. As Wiebe puts it, the current trajectory seems to be aimed at realizing Ninian Smart’s vision for a World Academy of Religion (WAR). Wiebe suggests that the calculus here – trading carefully established scientific bona fides for potential future membership numbers – is a deal worthy of the legendary bean farmer Jack. Yet he does also appear to concede that the inclusivist/expansionist party are not simply all dupes. While Wiebe certainly sees strong mercenary motivations, between the lines of his text one may also see quite clearly that the inclusivists cleave to historic IAHR principles no less than Wiebe – it’s just that they’re different principles! Therefore, the early involvement of IAHR with UNESCO is frequently invoked by Wiebe’s adversaries (as represented by Wiebe) as evidence for an “original” inclusivist/expansionist mandate. Certainly, since the 1980s the “internationalization” or “globalization” of the institution in all major aspects (leadership, membership/congresses, publications) has been articulated as a primary aim of successive executive committees/presidencies. Furthermore, at a third level, there are strong implications that the executive committee was swayed by current commonplaces to the effect that particular conceptions of both “science” and “religion” each emerged from imperial logics of domination and resistance, and that such conceptions continue to reproduce colonialist/neo-colonialist dynamics of oppression. It seems that this current denigration of “science” especially provokes Wiebe and fuels his need to defend the legacy of Werblowsky from attack, however indirect or perceived rather than real (frankly, it is hard to discern in Ann Taves’s position statement the “attack” on Werblowsky that Wiebe claims took place).

Readers of this journal may well be weary of arguments about the capacities, limitations, proper constitution, etc. of the academic study of religion in relation to diverse epistemologies, practices, institutions, etc. The charge that broader “humanistic” approaches to the study of religion inevitably pursue “crypto-theological” agendas was first developed in the pages of this journal in the early 1980s, in the course of an exchange between Donald Wiebe and Charles Davis, and quickly became the subject of third-party commentary. Thus, one may well ask: what can this latest volume by Wiebe possibly add to the conversation? Or, at least: why has it been selected/included as one of the three volumes under discussion here? First of all, as the above summary demonstrates, the debate has evolved over the years; key arguments have shifted, as the wider cultural and political climate in which such arguments take place has changed. Second, while Wiebe’s text displays plenty of the polarizing rhetoric and aggressive
polemic one has come to expect from him, the volume also contains many of the
documents exchanged by Wiebe and members of the IAHR executive committee –
correspondences, position papers prepared by both Wiebe and Taves, some rejoinders
and, crucially, correspondence between Wiebe and IAHR President Tim Jensen, which
Wiebe claims IAHR officers first promised and then declined to publish in the IAHR
Bulletin. Third, the volume contains an English translation of an essay in support of the
Werblowsky statement by Angelo Brelich which was until now available only in the
original Italian, published in 1979. For current readers, this essay helps makes some
sense of Wiebe’s repeated claims that in defending Werblowsky’s “basic minimum
presupposition” he is in fact defending an important tradition of the IAHR (rather than
fetishizing an ancient textual artifact or lionizing a hero, as critics might claim). This
translation is by Leonardo Ambasciano, whose recent book-length critique of our field/
discipline also appears in précis as a stand-alone chapter of Wiebe’s volume. Frankly,
this struck me as odd at first, but one may also read it as a signal from Wiebe that,
however isolated or marginalized he may have been at Delphi, his position is neither
eccentric nor obsolete, and is indeed shared by a prominent up-and-coming scholar in our
field. All-in-all, the volume combines roughly equal amounts of argumentation (direct
and indirect) with basic documentation, which accords well with Wiebe’s claim that the
book is a “history” of the Delphi meeting.

What emerges especially from the documentary lode of that history – though perhaps
not as clearly as it would from a countervailing narrative account by another protagonist –
is that Wiebe’s tendency to exaggerate positions for the sake of effect remains as strong
as ever. This is a mixed blessing. Since part of Taves’s argument (echoed by Tim
Jensen’s correspondence with Wiebe) is that sharp contrasts and dichotomies have been
overdrawn in the past and have outlived much of their usefulness in any case, Wiebe’s
polarizing style may be self-defeating. On the other hand, his dogged reiteration of key
positions throughout the narrative clarifies underlying issues in the constitution of the
IAHR – and also of Religious Studies as a world-wide enterprise – that have long
remained elusive (to this observer, at least). Thus, one is able to discern here the inherent
tension at the very heart of the IAHR: as an enterprise devoted to the practice of
“science” understood as a particular set of practices developed in certain Western aca-
demic institutions, operating on “religion” understood as a human phenomenon with
global distribution. Thus, the IAHR was mandated and constituted from the very outset
to hold both “exclusivist” and “inclusivist” tendencies in perpetual tension. Of course,
the IAHR does not do this in a vacuum but must operate in the context of broader
academic and cultural politics. Where once these latter tended to tip the scales in favor
of scientific “exclusivism”, more recently the balance has shifted in towards humanistic
“inclusivism”. Yet – and at the risk of evoking platitudes about journeys and destina-
tions – in an age in which de-colonization and anti-racism are now widely viewed as
necessary ongoing and perpetual processes/practices, the complete dual attainment of
both strictly scientific and fully global purposes may no longer be a viable objective,
either for the academic study of religion or for other academic arts and sciences. Thus,
Wiebe’s documentation, however tendentious, captures one fleeting moment in an aca-
demic “new normal” in which institutional stability or academic settlement seem no
longer either desirable or attainable. Finally, Wiebe’s account, as well as the
accompanying documentation, each underscore his belief in the importance of institutional due process, an importance that cannot be overstated under the circumstances just outlined. Wiebe’s evident ire at perceived departures from the IAHR’s written and customary constitution, and his strong emphasis on the role played by institutional formations, including in their interactions (aside: Wiebe was instrumental in founding several of these over the course of his career, including NAASR and IASR, each with particular aims in mind) accord well with Aaron Hughes’s observations on the role of very particular institutional formations in the creation of Religious Studies as an academic discipline.

This brings us to further points of connection between Wiebe and the other scholars discussed here. Obviously, both Wiebe and Maureen Matthews are concerned with the dangers of any departure, however well-meaning, from rigorous, scientific principles. The point is not that Wiebe and Matthews are by nature especially cantankerous or uncompromising (that may also be true – but it is irrelevant!). The point is that the tension between the “exclusivist” (sometimes also called “elitist”) academic mandate and the “inclusivist” ethic and politics (commonly signaled with reference to “stakeholder communities”, etc.) cannot be resolved by compromising either one or the other. As Matthews demonstrates, they can certainly coexist and may even be mutually supporting, but she is correct that no ethical ends are achieved by willy-nilly inclusion, as if one “Other” is just as good as another (in her example, such random inclusion of Three Fires left Pauingassi’s exclusion-to-the-point-of-invisibility untouched and intact). Likewise, Wiebe is correct that one cannot really compromise on scientific method to “accommodate” non- or pseudo-science. Thus, the strictly of his “strictly scientific” is redundant, since one either follows certain methodological protocols or one does not. By turn, scientific-ish is not a thing either. Nor, however, are the debates conducted and decisions taken at either the University of Winnipeg or at the IAHR meeting in Delphi (each behind closed doors) usefully framed as a choice between “science”, on the one hand, and “values” on the other. As already suggested, one of the most significant outcomes of Matthews’s work is that she shows how the right science supported the right ethical outcome and so rectified an injustice arising from inexpert or ill-informed/ un-advised inclusion. Therefore, Wiebe appears to blunder into a very deep and wide rhetorical pitfall when he reiterates the notorious dichotomy between science and values, as if either the scientific position – or, indeed, he himself – possessed neither values nor principles! Clearly, he does – especially inasmuch as he is oriented by both Werblowsky’s statement and the latter’s impressive personal example. First of all, like Werblowsky, Wiebe is not at all anti-religious. As Wiebe’s brief biography of Werblowsky attests, he is well aware of the latter’s religious commitments, including academic ones to the cause of interfaith dialogue. Similarly, Wiebe’s own academic career has included stints in administrative/leadership roles supporting the religious mandates of both the Toronto School of Theology and the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College. More importantly, Werblowsky clearly understood the costs of a rigorous science with limited appeal (i.e., of simply excluding non-scientists) as much the lesser evil compared to the global export and promulgation of a compromised or counterfeit science. Today, one can hardly overlook the deeply colonialist implications of peddling low-grade wares abroad and then rationalizing such exploitation with paternalistic tropes.
and other self-justifications. Yet, it seems that this is precisely what Wiebe sees the IAHR doing. Though he is never explicit, one gets the strong sense that he, like Maureen Matthews, is not just defending science for its own sake, or making space for himself and his hobby-concerns; rather, like Matthews, he apparently wants to preserve science for anybody who really needs it. This may be one reason for the curious inclusion of Ambasciano’s essay in this volume: as a signal of support and affinity for other scholars, both intergenerationally and internationally. Like Werblowsky, moreover, Wiebe is very clear on the point that he certainly does not distain religion; nor does he wish to deny religion any academic space, either as traditional disciplinary Theology or as other “engaged” projects. But, like Werblowsky, Wiebe argues that there are other academic venues and organizations for such pursuits; indeed, Wiebe’s urgency arises from the circumstance that he sees the IAHR as the only remaining viable international organization dedicated to the scientific study of religion. Moreover, for Wiebe the assimilation of the IAHR to, say, the AAR or an AAR-style WAR would be undesirable from either epistemic standpoint, either scientific or non-scientific. Such an assimilation, however iringic the initial approach, would inevitably hamper both enterprises at best, and would more likely result in domination of one episteme by the other. What Wiebe’s account does not clarify, despite its historical framing, is that keeping scientific and non-scientific studies (and not, necessarily, people!) separate is also a matter of historical responsibility, if not necessity. Werblowsky certainly got this point. Thus, Wiebe’s description of his importance is deficient in one key regard. Wiebe identifies Werblowsky as Israeli by nationality. But it is simply inconceivable that in 1960 at Marburg (of all places!), Werblowsky would not also have given a thought or two to the fact that he was born a German Jew – and that he had been denied the nationality of his birth largely by the application of a massive pseudo-scientific apparatus! Thus, the Werblowsky statement embodies both personal and historical rejections of pseudo-science precisely for its demonstrated appeal, an appeal that always has enough voltage to jump the gap – these days narrow in any case – between what is culturally popular and what is politically populist. If Wiebe gets this – and I think he does – it would account at least in part for his vehement and urgent tone; it may even account for his claim that Taves “attacked” Werblowsky, a hyperbole functioning as shorthand for Wiebe’s feeling that the proposed “new” direction of the IAHR, in collaborating with pseudo-science, denies the historical experience and legacy of that whole generation of re-founding modernists in the academic study of religion (aside: Wiebe’s volume opens with a foreword in which he identifies with Max Weber’s disappointment in the Sociological Society).

By way of conclusion . . .

This brings us, finally, back to what these three works all have in common. They’re each avowedly modernist/neo-modernist in how they approach the study of religion, in a time where being that can no longer be taken for granted as a necessary outcome of the historical process, or rational critical engagement with same. Hughes illuminates the many halting steps and contingent twists and turns by which the modern study of religion was established in Canadian universities. He thereby also highlights the fragility of the discipline (although his point is somewhat undercut by recourse to older histories that
were more bombastic in celebrating their own achievements). Matthews and Wiebe then
give account of staggering failures and losses in recent academic institutional treatments
of knowledge about religion. In each instance, recourse to modern scientific standards in
scholarly practice/procedure is offered in mitigation of the excesses arising from
“progressive” anti-modernism and uninformed self-authorized action. Wiebe outlines
very clearly the circumstances leading up to an impending departure from scientific
methodology as the IAHR’s *raison d’être* (now, pending the outcome of voting at the
next Congress in 2025). His observations on the future of the IAHR without that
*raison d’être* are similarly clear: there wouldn’t be any point in maintaining the institution. But
while he appears to return to outworn fact–value distinctions, actually he – like Wer-
blowsky before him – considers supposedly more inclusive but a methodologically weak
pseudo-science as a poisoned chalice offered to all nations. Thus, Wiebe – himself no
stranger to “irony” – sees in a departure from the IAHR’s scientific mandate also a
betrayal of its internationalist tradition, an own-goal for the team sporting the values of
inclusion and globalization. Matthews, finally, demonstrates the real power of rigorous
scientific methodology against the smoke and mirrors of arrogant institutional might
emboldened by the prospect of popular appeal. Moreover, her small contribution to
science has already made a huge difference to the people of Pauingassi (i.e., “in the real
world”), and righted some historic wrongs. In this regard Matthews’s perseverance may
be read as a vindication of Werblowsky’s legacy in the face of counter-Enlightenment
distain for expertise, or random urgent acts of political correctness. On reflection, I find
this glimpse of local, concrete possibility offered by Matthews more hopeful than *longue
duréé* accounts of either our discipline’s emergence out of the muck . . . or, indeed, its
descent back into it.

Finally, much of this review essay concerns the peculiarities of scholarship, the
foibles of academics and, ultimately, the great diversity of scholarships and academi-
cians contained within the confines of our very small discipline, itself practiced in many
relatively small institutions (especially when compared with, say, a national civil ser-
vice, or UNESCO, or Amazon.com, Inc.). I am well aware that some colleagues will find
such considerations lamentably earth-bound and dreadfully self-referential; however, I
see no alternative to considering Religious Studies as an institutional creature first and
foremost (and my guess is that colleagues who see it otherwise will not have read this far
in any case). Frankly, such colleagues have spent several decades debating words –
Religion, Spirituality, Culture, Worldview? – all in a manner that, also frankly, smacks
of neo-nominalism. Just as we’ve come to understand that banishing certain words won’t
end sexism or racism because it doesn’t address basic institutional issues, we might now
reconsider the fundamentally institutional formation of our discipline (and not just in
order to purge recently identified moral failures or atone for select sins of the past).
When Jonathan Z Smith addressed religion as a creation of the scholar’s study, some
people took it as a first strike against *sui generis* religion and for scholarly “reflexivity”.
Many more, however, probably imagined a space in the mode of St Jerome’s study as it
was represented by Albrecht Dürer and his countless romantic imitators. What they
certainly didn’t consider is networks of departmental offices linked by internet, small
groups of scholars creating virtual communities via social media (subject only to various
institutional constraints: university communications policies, censorship laws,
commercial and non-commercial algorithms), hierarchies of administrators professionalized principally by their isolation from academic ranks, the dual enabling/disabling effects of collective agreements on academic freedom, elected officials swayed by stakeholders’ block votes, university officials answerable to perpetual donor agreements, and so forth. None of these things is peripheral to our discipline; all of them are central to what it means to be an “academic” student of religion in the 21st century; above all, they make “the scholar’s study” an eminently social institution. In sum, “the academy” doesn’t exist alone and apart, sui generis, any more than religion does. Rather, the academic study of religion is institutionally diverse, contingent, peculiar, imperfect, realized only in acts of both historical imagination and political machination, all because it is academic. This is what these three books, together, can tell us. Therefore, finally, it seems entirely appropriate to conclude this academic review of academic works on the academic study of religion with words from Erich Kästner’s classic academic novel, Fabian (1931): “Es lebe der kleine Unterschied!”

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ORCID iD
Johannes Wolfart https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4408-028X

Notes
1. See Don Wiebe, A Report on the Special Executive Committee Meeting of the International Association for the History of Religions in Delphi, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 32/2 (2020): 150–158, and Satoko Fujiwara and Tim Jensen, What’s in a (Change of) Name? Much – but not That Much – and Not What Wiebe Claims, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 32/2 (2020): 159–184.
2. See Ann Taves, From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies, Religion 50/1 (2020): 137–147.
3. Sajjad Rizvi, Reversing the Gaze? Or Decolonizing the Study of the Qur’an? Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 33/2 (2021): 122–138.
For example, see Sam Gill, “The Academic Study of Religion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXVII/4 (1994), 965–975.

5. Compare Will Sweetman, Colonialism all the way down? Religion and the secular in early modern writing on south India. In: T Fitzgerald, ed., *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Equinox, 2007), 117–134.

6. Jonathan Z Smith, A twice-told tale: The history of the history of religions’ history, *Numen* 48/2 (2001): 131–146, here 131.

7. Lorne L Dawson, Neither Nerve nor Ecstasy: Comment on the Wiebe-Davis Exchange, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 15/2 (1986): 145–151, compare William Arnal, Willi Braun, and Russell T McCutcheon, eds., *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion: Essays in Honor of Donald Wiebe* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

8. Compare JC Wolfart, Becoming answerable for what we say: Colonialism and the Pax AAR, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 30/3–4 (2001): 381–388.