An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures

Donald Wiebe

The most recent of the presidential addresses to the American Academy of Religion by Robert Orsi, entitled “A New Beginning All Over Again,” suggests that the AAR has approved a radical change of orientation and adoption of new goals. I set out here to review the thoughts and ideas of the elected leaders of the AAR in their presidential addresses over the past decade in search of evidence for such a new beginning. I argue that, for the most part, the message of those addresses provides support for making the voice of religion heard both on college and university campuses and society at large and that in this, the AAR still reflects the intentions and aims of the National Association of Biblical Instructors from which the AAR evolved.

IN 1997 I PUBLISHED AN ESSAY in which I presented the results of a comparative analysis of the presidential addresses of the first thirty years of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and those of the deliberately religiously orientated National Association of Biblical Instructors (NABI), from which the AAR evolved (Wiebe 1997a, 1998). I entitled the essay “A Religious Agenda Continued” (1997a) for even though the AAR...
declared itself in support of a nonreligious scholarly agenda in the study of religion in the academic context, I was able to show that the “message” of its official leaders was indistinguishable from the religiously orientated messages of the presidential addresses delivered to the NABI. As I noted there, nearly half (thirteen) of the twenty-eight published addresses are precisely the kind one finds in formal theological contexts, concerned with issues of ethics, hermeneutics, biblical exegesis, death, personal identity, etc. The remaining essays are all, to some degree or other, focused on methodological concerns and a clarification of the proper character of the study of religion in the university setting. Of those, six present explicit, rigorously argued proposals for a full integration of theology into the religious studies program, and another four urge that the study of religion in the college and university setting be “engaged” in the sense that the student of religion become directly involved in the spiritual life of those whom they study. Three of the addresses appear to be wholly without religious or theological inspiration, but two of those counsel rejections of a scientific or objective approach to the study of religious phenomena, and the third promotes the integration of a theological methodology into the field. Lastly, only two of the published addresses acknowledge the value and promote the adoption of a scientific framework for Religious Studies and warn that the academic integrity of the comparative religion enterprise will be lost if the AAR does not succeed in preventing the infiltration of theology into the religious studies curriculum.

It is clear from an analysis of these addresses, then, that from 1964 through 1993 the AAR, as represented by its elected leadership, remained essentially a religio-theological organization despite its attempt to transcend its Christian (essentially liberal Protestant) heritage. Furthermore, even though the AAR made some progress in overcoming the traditional Protestant dominance of the field, it did not provide the foundation for a more objective, scientific study of religion(s) but rather espoused an essentially religio-humanistic agenda wholly commensurate with the aims and aspirations of its liberal Protestant forebears; the primary concern of its leaders, that is, was not simply to seek a descriptive, explanatory, and theoretical knowledge about religion(s) as a socially constructed aspect of human existence and, therefore, as historical phenomena, but rather to engage in religious inquiry and in an inclusive religious conversation that would expand their inner understanding and appreciation of a transcendent religious reality.

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1 A more rounded account of the character and development of the AAR can be found in my The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy (Wiebe 1998), chapters 5, 6, 14, and 15.
A more recent AAR presidential address by Robert A. Orsi (2004) is entitled “A New Beginning Again,” which may suggest to some a radical change of direction for the Academy. I will argue here, however, that the title is misleading and that the address really simply returns us once again to the original (essentially) religious agenda of the NABI. Indeed, Orsi’s essay provides the motivation here for a full review of the presidential addresses subsequent to those discussed in my original essay on thoughts of the elected leaders of the AAR. Such an analysis, I shall show, will provide solid evidence that the AAR’s earlier dominant concern with “the religious conversation” endures and that that conversation continues to marginalize, if not entirely eclipse, the scientific study of religion.²

ANALYSIS

In “Refusing the Wild Pomegranate Seed: America, Religious History, and the Life of the Academy,” Catherine L. Albanese (1994) (See Appendix)—the sole exception in the past decade to earlier and subsequent trends of thought in the AAR—uses the image of Persephone (in Homer’s Hymn to Demeter) eating the wild pomegranate to treat, simultaneously, substantive and methodological concerns. Like the early historians of the contact between Europeans and native cultures in America who tried “to efface the threat of change in [their] unitive vision of the fusion of all immigrants and faiths” (213) by muting “the noise of difference and cover[ing] the discord of contact and change” (215), contemporary historians within the academy, she argues, also have generally deflected attention from historical change. As she points out, “[c]hange yielded place to structure and permanence” (218), for example, in the work of Fernand Braudel and the Annales school in its understanding of history as la langue durée, or was subverted in a

² I undertook this task then and continue the analysis of subsequent presidential addresses to the AAR here, on the assumption that the presidents of the Academy are, in effect, the leading spokespersons for those who elected them to this office. And given that they are elected by the membership of the Academy, it also strikes me as reasonable to assume that, for the most part, their addresses to the Academy essentially reflect the views and aspirations of most members of the AAR. Consequently, presidential addresses to the Academy are not usually technical research papers or elaborations of theories and are not criticized as such. Rather, I respond to them here as general statements about the aims and aspirations of the field that point to its strengths and weaknesses in the framework of an overall vision of the nature of Religious Studies as an academic discipline (and of the obligations of the scholars that work within it). My aim in both the earlier and present article is to ascertain the views, explicit and implicit, about the nature of the Religious Studies enterprise set out in these addresses and to discern whether they differ appreciably from the religiously orientated convictions about the field held by the presidents of the NABI. There is no need, therefore, to explore the origins of the ideas found in such addresses or how those ideas fit into the overall context of the other scholarly work of their authors. That would be a task that goes beyond the framework of the present study.
series of poetic tropes in the work of scholars like Hayden White, or lost in
La Capra’s work by the contemplation of “rhetorical ploys on a literary
landscape” (219). And American religious historians, she maintains, only
emphasized these trends in the history-of-religions methodology of scholars
like Mircea Eliade who “stressed comparison and continuity” (220). She
writes: “A wave of methodological self-consciousness and innovation had
linked historiography to the arts, and now history looked to what seemed
the more promising social sciences for new alliances” (217). Within the
AAR this meant that the historians really shared a common methodological
ploy with the theologians, philosophers, and social scientists who seem to
predicate “an overarching interpretive fiction” that factors out change.
Albanese therefore calls for a change in the Academy that involves the
refusal to construct safe-havens “from the general assaults of change that
comes with time’s passing” (222) and the requirement to tell “the tales of
events and human contacts that signal major and irrevocable transforma-
tions in the human condition” (223). Religions scholars, that is—so she
insists—must “learn to eat the apple of death and, with Persephone, enjoy
its sweetness” (223), and then “watch to see what happens” (224).

Whereas Albanese’s address has no overt religious or humanistic
agenda, Peter J. Paris’s (1995) address on “The Ethics of African Ameri-
can Religious Scholarship” reintroduces the emphasis of the previous
three decades by arguing that the scholarship of the AAR must embody a
moral mission—that it must be much more than a simple academic or
scientific undertaking. For Paris, W. E. B. DuBois’s notion that the aim of
education is “the realization of racial justice in the nation’s thought and
practice” (489) provides the model for his understanding of the task of
the student and teacher of religion. Indeed, for him, the task of the student
of religion involves being a leader, a public intellectual (491). According
to him, such scholars actually create a new kind of knowledge—the prod-
cut of “a new methodology [introduced] into the academy of religious
scholarship [by the Black Theology movement], a methodology that
takes as its point of departure the experience of oppression that African
Americans endured for several centuries” (495) and therefore involves a
conjunction of academic methodology with social justice advocacy (492).
Paris also expresses his appreciation for the moral support this move-
ment has received from the AAR, which is to be found in the emergence
of African American scholars in the leadership of the Academy (493)
which is due, he says, correctly I think, to “a gradual reform of organiza-
tional practices commensurate with that moral affirmation” (494).

Lawrence E. Sullivan’s (1996) primary aim in “Coming to Our Senses:
Religious Studies in the Academy” is to provide an avenue by which we
can secure a place for Religious Studies in the academy and of renewing the
role of the academic life in society (3). This will require us, he argues, to reframe the task of the study of religion in such a fashion that we move beyond simply “defining a place for teaching about religion in the academy itself” (2) and to see how it can renew higher education so as to ensure that it will “remain a valuable reflection on life and a cultural resource in our society” (10). Sullivan argues that this can be achieved by “coming to our senses,” that is, by relying on “senses largely left aside in the effort of [R]eligious [S]tudies to achieve legitimacy within the academy” (3), namely, the sense of freedom, the sense of pain, the senses quickened by the arts, and the sense of experience as seen through the neurosciences with special reference to understanding the religious senses (which, however, are not spelled out in any detail). As Sullivan’s analyses of these various senses proceeds, it becomes clear that for him the academic study of religion is an “engaged” study—one that, for example, not only studies freedom in a detached and objective manner but uses its location in the academy to contribute to the establishment of freedom or undertakes an analysis of the sense of pain “in solidarity with those that suffer” (6). This implies, argues Sullivan, that we may have more to learn about religion from religious leaders and devotees than from the great academic figures in the history of the discipline; it also means that we will ourselves then become cultural resources in our society (10), for it will force us to work more collaboratively “with our colleagues in the professional schools: of medicine and the healing professions, of government and law, of arts and design, of education and journalism” (9). Paris and Sullivan, then, are in the same camp.

Robert Detweiler’s (1997) “Literary Echoes of Postmodernism” is a homiletic exercise written, as he puts it, “in the great tradition of ‘religious speaking’ ” (737). Detweiler’s basic concern in this address is with the pain and madness experienced by human beings, whether produced by war and genocide or by recent developments that have shattered that reality called the subject—“the fracturing of souls that constituted modernism” (740). And his aim is to provide an antidote to the dystopias of our world. This he thinks is possible through an exploration of the notion of koinonia, that is, through the notion of community—“a fellowship of believers based on the common trust of those committed to each other in faith” (744). According to Detweiler, koinonia makes possible—through what he calls “religious reading”—a transition from Angst to Gelassenheit. And he sees the AAR and the Society for Biblical Literature


(SBL) as possible resources in this work of “resurrection.” “It may be,” he writes, “that the mission of our two societies will be to exercise a calm disinterest, a discernment, even a disenchantment when the worst who are full of passionate intensity invite mythologies that project death as a climax—a death of imagination” (742). And, again: “I would like to think of the AAR as a community exploring koinonia, facing these contemporary conditions, and hastening to lessen them and their anxieties” (744).

Methodological issues are front and center in Judith Plaskow’s analysis of the AAR in “The Academy as Real Life: New Participants and Paradigms in the Study of Religion” (1998), although one might reasonably consider her thesis to be anti-methodological given that she argues that “we cannot separate real life from the academy” (535). According to Plaskow, the AAR has seen considerable transformation since its founding, and especially so since 1970, and has become much more tuned in to the concerns of society as a whole. It is no longer, she insists, anchored in its Protestant past but rather has become much more pluralistic [although she also admits that this “does not mean the old Protestant paradigm has been completely decentered. . .” (527)]. Furthermore, there is an increased involvement of women in the Academy, and this has transformed many aspects of this field of scholarship (i.e., the ways we conceptualize and teach about the field [524], the range of questions scholars are now allowed to ask [523], the methodological approach permitted scholars in the field [523], and so on). Most importantly for her, these changes have made “the AAR more activist as an organization” (526) and in the process has allowed “the changes in the wider culture to nuance and deepen our understanding of religion” (528). She writes:

I am commending the notion of the AAR as a space in which we allow current social and political questions to enrich our thinking, even as we seek to respond to and intervene in them. . . . [W]e are bound together by the opportunity and necessity of grappling with the changes in the academy, aware that in doing so we also grapple with the changes in the larger world. (534–535)

For Plaskow, then, as for Paris and Sullivan, the task of the scholar of religion is to deal with systems of value and to deal with economic, cultural, and religious differences in society and “to imagine” better ways of living (534).

In “Becoming Answerable for What We See” Margaret Miles (1999) raises similar themes for she argues that a proper understanding of the academic study of religion must recognize its character as a “craft” (471) that integrates “critical and passionately engaged scholarship” (472).
sees the term “religious studies” as “providentially ambiguous” (472) for this makes it possible, she claims, “to lay to rest the debate over fundamental differences between ‘theological studies’ and the ‘study of religion’ ” (471) which will allow us, it appears, to “understand religious studies as a discursive field, a rich conversation, rather than as a single field with identifiable boundaries of content or method” (475). According to Miles, therefore, students of religion must recognize that they are responsible to three publics: the public sphere, the faith communities, and the university disciplines, and the last, it appears, is subordinate to the other two, for according to Miles Religious Studies should foster “‘an ongoing conversation about fundamental issues of life and death, conducted by persons representing living faith commitments and having different methodological concerns’ ” (474). The critical differences that still characterize the field—disciplinary, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, and of sexual orientation—Miles argues, require new models, paradigms, and tools that will make it possible for us, not only in Religious Studies but in society at large, “to achieve the task of inclusion and recognition that nevertheless retains and honors difference” (479). She finds in Plotinus the resources for that task, because his philosophical theology was one of oscillation “between identification and difference, universal consanguinity and particularity” (483). In effect then, Miles proposes that members of the AAR place an essentially contemplative and spiritual discipline at the core of the religious studies enterprise for only then will students of religion find a common bond “in their commitment to their work and to a socially responsible life” (483). Religious Studies will then truly be able to “integrate critical and passionately engaged scholarship” (471).

Smart (2000) raises a number of methodological and organizational issues that trouble him about the AAR in his address entitled “The Future of the Academy”. He is concerned that the field clearly distinguishes advocacy from description (543), he frets over an increasing specialization in the field that he worries may lead to its fragmentation (544), and he laments the demise of phenomenology and the failure to recognize the importance of comparison in the academic study of religion (544). The study of religion, then, and the AAR whose task it is to support it, Smart argues, must espouse the pursuit of objectivity in the description and analysis of religious phenomena (545–546), rediscover the value of phenomenological and comparative studies that provide the discipline with scientific credibility, and, he suggests, promote a federal structure for the study of religion [involving the AAR and the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) and other national and international associations of scholars in religion (provided that they
have a scholarly dimension)] because, as he puts it, “[t]he study of religion and religions is too important not to be pursued on a global basis . . ., [and] should not be left to hegemony by certain powers” (549). Despite these proposals in support of an attempt to restore the scientific approach to the study of religion, Smart nevertheless does not argue for the exclusion of theology from the field—so long as it is not establishmentmentarian theology (543), he agrees with the theologians that students of religion need to “pay attention to the spiritual and moral values of other faiths” (548), and he argues that there is no room for reductionism in the study of religion (550).

Rebecca S. Chopp (2001), in “Beyond the Founding Fratricidal Conflict: A Tale of Three Cities,” rejects the notion that the boundary between theological studies and Religious Studies constitutes a founding conflict with respect to the development of the AAR, despite the fact that, as she notes, “[n]early every presidential address of the last twenty years” has confronted it as such (467). She admits that many of the addresses attempt to overcome the problems this conflict poses (epistemological imperialism, exclusivism, etc.) but without success (468). For her, a new type of scholar, committed to a rhetoric of partnership, is needed if this fratricidal conflict between Theology and Religious Studies is to be overcome. This will require a rejection of the model of the scholar as a “disciplinary researcher instead of a civic intellectual” (465) and an espousal of the scholar as an engaged citizen in the broader public realm. Chopp, therefore, espouses a thesis in line with Paris, Sullivan, Plaskow, and Miles, and she affirms the statement of the AAR Board (2002) in response to the nine/eleven terrorist attacks as descriptive of the essential task of the student of religion: “[E]ducational engagements are appropriate to the Academy’s mission to foster reflection upon and understanding of religious traditions, issues, questions, and values by bringing the teaching and scholarship of our members to bear on the public understanding of religion and religions” (462). This means that the study of religion cannot simply be concerned with knowledge about religion “but must address practices and disciplines that form the future citizen” (463), and universities can no longer remain ivory towers but must enter partnerships with other elements and institutions of society (469). These scholars represent a new type, and they “are quite aware of a more ‘public’ aspect to their work as compared with the work found in the discipline-bound research of some of their colleagues” (471).

Vasudha Narayanan (2002) provides a critique of Western approaches to the study of religion and argues for the adoption of what she calls an epistemic pluralism in her address, “Embodyed Cosmologies: Sights of
Piety, Sites of Power”. From her perspective the study of religion in its present form operates within a Eurocentric frame that privileges the word/text over other sources of knowledge (499) and is, therefore, imperialistic. This calls for a process of “decolonization” and, in her estimation, this implies that the AAR—which is “in the business of learning about and teaching many cultures” (499)—must champion “epistemic diversity.” For Narayanan, music, icons, architecture, geomancy, dance, and other performing arts must be recognized for the indigenous knowledge systems they are. “Dances and architectures,” she writes, for example, “depict embodied cosmologies; architecture connects the dance and the dancer to the cosmos” (500), and “[d]ance articulates the relationship that human beings within a society have with each other” (501). This she calls “corporeal knowledge”—a language of nonverbal communication rather than a knowledge articulated philosophically—which delivers its insights and world view (paradoxically) through stories and provides a way of participating in the power structures of society (503). Details as how concepts and world views are transmitted in music, dance, and geomancy without the use of language, however, is not provided, nor is there any explanation given as to how these forms of knowledge facilitate the individual’s participation in social power structures. Nevertheless, Narayanan maintains that it is European imperialism that bears the fault here; and she—somewhat sarcastically—writes: “This is the corporate power of the academy that cuts and edits religion into x number of sound and word bites. Cities, stupas, temples, and towns fly outside our protective compartments as our academic train speeds by them; we pay no attention to them because we are content reading our books inside the train” (510–11). And the academy, she concludes, has not yet made a serious effort to go beyond the Eurocentric construction of the field of Religious Studies by valorizing such interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methods.

Robert A. Orsi’s (2004) address—“A New Beginning Again”—is somewhat peculiar in that much of it is given over to a justification of the Academy’s decision to cut its ties to the SBL and to run its annual meetings on its own. This concern, however, is “prefaced” with comments about the nine/eleven terrorist attacks on the United States being recognized by scholars of religion in the AAR as a call for them to enter the public square with renewed energy and to determine the nature of their responsibilities, individually and collectively, as citizens of the world. Orsi then goes on to note that the AAR of today is very different from what it was when it emerged out of the substance of the NABI; it is now, he asserts, a capacious academic field responsible “for a public academic conversation about religion” (593, my italics) that will contribute to the
well-being of the world. (Clearly, then, he belongs to the company of Paris, Sullivan, Plaskow, Miles, and Chopp, all of whom concern themselves with the public role of religion and seem to think of the student of religion as being a public intellectual.) However, Orsi’s argument justifying the recent decision by the AAR to bring an end to its long association with the SBL inadvertently reveals considerable continuity of purpose between the NABI and the AAR. He not only rejects the criticism that separation from the SBL is anti-Christian but also adamantly denies that it is in any sense anti-theological. Indeed, he faults his critics for failing to recognize that Christianity has been decentered and cannot therefore continue to function in the AAR as the “hidden norm” for the academic study of religion as it has in the past, and he further insists that “the AAR is home to the most wide-ranging and robust theological conversation” (597). The only change in the character of the AAR upon its emergence from the NABI, therefore, is in the loss of the dominance (overt or covert) of the Christian voice in the otherwise ongoing theological conversation, which now, as Orsi puts it, is “a capacious and inclusive conversation, a rich coming together of scholars of diverse methods, experiences, and stories,” that allows them to learn by “stretching out across differences to meet each other in the shared work of understanding all the things that humans have made of themselves, of each other, and of their worlds in the idiom of their religions and in the company of their gods” (599–600). And even though Orsi claims that the AAR “welcomes all scholars of religion” (600) into its fold, it is clear that the scientific student seeking explanatory and theoretical accounts of religious phenomena, religions, and religion is no more a welcome partner in this ecumenical conversational enterprise than she/he was in the theological conversation dominated by Christianity.

THE RELIGIOUS CONVERSATION ENDURES

The summary of the contents of the presidential addresses provided above will be seen by disinterested observers to bear out my claim in the introduction to this article that the AAR is still essentially a religious organization committed to supporting religious inquiry and to promoting a religious (theological) conversation on American university and college campuses, although on a much broader, cross-cultural scale than that of

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4 For a critique of this view of the student of religion see my essay: “The Politics of Wishful Thinking? Disentangling the Role of the Scholar-Scientist from that of the Public Intellectual in the Modern Academic Study of Religion” (Wiebe 2005).
its Christian predecessor organization, the NABI.\textsuperscript{5} Nine of the ten addresses can reasonably be considered to have as their objective the clarification of methodological issues in the academic study of religion [excluding only Robert Detweiler’s address (1997)], although seven of the nine [excluding the addresses by Catherine Albanese (1994) and Ninian Smart (2000)] are fundamentally anti-scientific in tone and intent, in that they propose approaches to the academic study of religion that are essentially religious or religio-political. Although they do not deny that some scholarship is involved, Peter Paris (1995) and Lawrence Sullivan (1996), for example, identify the student of religion primarily with the civic or public intellectual rather than the scientist or scholar. Each wants to see religion involved in the renewal of higher education (an explicit goal of the original NABI)\textsuperscript{6} so that higher education might become a more fulsome resource in or to society. And each seems to espouse an anti-science mentality; not in any absolute sense, but rather in the sense of “arguing” (asserting) a cognitive/epistemic limitation of science and proposing a “methodology” that will produce knowledge not available to the scientific approach to the study of religion. For Paris, the study of religion is, above all else, a moral undertaking and produces a new kind of knowledge via the realization of justice in society (for Paris, especially, connected to achieving racial justice): a “corrective understanding,” as he puts it (493). For Sullivan, the study of religion must be “engaged” and, therefore, in a sense constitutes, at least at times, a kind of “compassionate science” (6). The knowledge gained here is not objective, rational, and scientific but rather a knowledge of the senses, which amounts to a kind of experiential and, therefore, testimonial knowledge—moral and/or religious. Judith Plaskow (1998) also seems to assume an anti-science stance in calling for the study of religion to be an “engaged” enterprise rather than wholly confined to the Ivory Tower. And like Paris, she argues an “identity politics” thesis, maintaining

\textsuperscript{5} This is not to deny that scientifically credible work is carried out by many members of the AAR or that there are no scientific students of religion to be found among the members of the Academy. As I noted elsewhere (Wiebe 2000), with the growth of the AAR over the past several decades many specializations in the study of religion have emerged that have enriched the field by encouraging a depth of knowledge in a wide range of religious traditions. The AAR’s concern for academic legitimation within the modern university, moreover, has increased methodological reflection about the field as well, which has made possible the emergence of some new sub-disciplines that will, I have no doubt, contribute significantly to the field in the future. The only point at issue here is whether the AAR can acknowledge the “scientific voice” that counsels a form of research, analysis, and theoretical reflection that might lead to an account of religious traditions and phenomena in terms of realities that might be more basic than that pointed to by religions and religion and whether the AAR can recognize a form of research that replaces “emancipatory” concerns with epistemic/cognitive concerns alone.

\textsuperscript{6} On the goals of the National Association of Biblical Instructors see my essay “Against Science in the Academic Study of Religion: On the Emergence and Development of the AAR” (Wiebe 2004).
that scholars of religion, as an element in the study of religion, ought to better women’s lives (526). The student of religion as responsible for social development and the like is something she thinks has emerged because of the work of the AAR, and she believes that the AAR provides “a space in which we allow current social and political questions to enrich our thinking, even as we seek to respond to and intervene in them” (534). Vasudha Narayanan (2002) goes even further in an anti-science direction (though not clearly so in the support of a form of outright religious thinking) in championing “epistemic diversity” and forms of “corporeal knowledge.” She finds the contemporary university to be imperialistic and calls for a decolonization of the Eurocentric framework of the current academic study of religion, but this is more rhetoric than provision of a genuine alternative. It appears, however, that the alternative sources of knowledge she proposes be taken seriously by the academy are essentially religious in character, involving the adoption of particular cosmological and metaphysical world views.

The addresses by Margaret Miles (1999) and Rebecca Chopp (2001) also see the religious studies enterprise as involving a good deal more than objective, scientific analysis and understanding. Each insists that the enterprise must be more than an academic undertaking—it must be “engaged” scholarship that, for Miles, allows the religious and political worlds to impinge on the academic task and, for Chopp, involves the student of religion in the “formation” of good citizens and public intellectuals. Religion for each is meant to shape human lives, and the scholar of religion must be concerned to bring religion to bear not only on shaping our universities and colleges but society itself. Each, moreover, criticizes those who argue that the academic study of religion must be clearly differentiated from theology (religion) because they believe, it appears, that such a nonreligious study of religion will be sterile with respect to our broader social responsibilities. Their positions, therefore, recapitulate those espoused by members of the NABI and most AAR presidents, especially after 1970.7 This is especially clear in Miles’s claim that contemplative

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7 In the early days of the AAR there was a genuine concern to distinguish itself from the NABI and to make of the study of religion in colleges and universities a more “respectable” academic/scholarly/scientific affair. This impetus was lost after 1970, largely, I believe, because members of the Academy thought that they had achieved scholarly credibility through the organizational success of the Academy. As I noted in “A Religious Agenda Continued”: “The contrast between Welch—in his prima facie case for the scientific character of the scholarly study of religion in the North American University setting—and his successor presidents of the AAR could not be more complete” (Wiebe, 1997a: 362). By 1980 William A. Clebsch was warning the AAR that the integrity of the academic study of religion was being undermined by the infiltration of theology into the religious studies curriculum.
and spiritual disciplines lie at the heart of the religious studies enterprise as “conversation,” which is what the AAR promotes. Robert Orsi (2004) also defends the notion of Religious Studies as an “inclusive conversation,” but I shall return to his address below.

The addresses by Catherine Albanese (1994) and Ninian Smart (2000) are neither anti-scientific in tone or intent nor partial to the notion of Religious Studies as some kind of grand inclusive conversation directed toward the reconstruction of the university or the renewal of society as a whole. Their essays are fundamentally “philosophical” pieces concerned primarily with methodological issues. Albanese, for example, is concerned with methodological deficiencies in the treatment of religious matters by historians, and she argues that a history-of-religions methodology of the kind espoused by Eliade stresses comparison and continuity to the extent of losing sight of historical change in religions. Clearly she sees this as the result of the influence of the religious mind-set that attempts to construct “safe-havens” from the historical changes that can be seen to present a threat to human aspirations. Smart, on the contrary, is pro-science (i.e., nonreductionist science) and defends the study of religion as an objectivist enterprise rather than some form of inclusivist religious conversation; although, to be sure, he does not propose that all theology be excluded from departments of Religious Studies, he claims that students of religion ought to “pay attention to the spiritual and moral values of other faiths” (548). He thinks this to be particularly important for the global study of religion, which he believed would unify the discipline. Eschewing imperialism he nevertheless remarks that the strength and wealth of the AAR could help establish a Global Academy of Religion for such a purpose but, interestingly, comments that this “should not be left to hegemony by certain powers” (549).

Of the ten addresses, then, nine in some way or other refer directly to strengthening the AAR’s interest in fostering a general, “nonsectarian” kind of religious study of religion that will increase both the role religion plays in the college and university setting and—through the formation of students for citizenship, and the active engagement of professors in civic

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As Smart notes in his address, he began to promote the idea of a World Academy of Religion as early as 1990. Luther H. Martin and I (1993) responded critically to the proposal because we thought Smart was being too sanguine about the imperialist possibilities of such a global enterprise “run” by the AAR. I do not think changing the name of the project to the “Global Academy of Religion” is a satisfactory defense against the academic study of religion being left to the hegemony of the AAR. [On the topic of hegemony/colonialism see Johannes C. Wolfart’s (2001) critique of Margaret Miles’s presidential address and my address to the Korean Association for the Study of Religion entitled: “American Influence on the Shape of Things to Come: Religious Studies in the Twenty-First Century” (2000)].
affairs—the role of religion in society at large. In this regard Orsi (2004) is wrong in suggesting that the AAR of today is very different from what it was when it emerged out of the substance of the NABI. There is no doubt that the present AAR is no longer dominated by a Protestant, or even a Christian, agenda—that it is much more capacious and religiously pluralistic—but it is still, nevertheless, a religious or religio-political conversation and not a scientifically motivated study of religion that the AAR is interested in promoting. Indeed, quite the opposite appears to be the case, for the AAR seems to have embraced, with enthusiasm, the deconstructivist and postmodern agendas espoused by scholars in the humanities as an antidote against the scientific approach to the study of religion championed by some in the AAR. As David Tracy put it: “[A] substantial proportion of the American academy, including the academy in religious studies, has in fact become distrustful of the epistemological and theoretical versions of the Enlightenment in favor of one or another anti-Enlightenment version of what has come to be known as postmodernity” (Tracy 1995: 328). Martin E. Marty—an icon in and of the AAR—had already noted this shift in the mind of the Academy, and clearly supported it, in his scorn for those scholars in the field who, as he put it, still “cherish a scientific ideal which the other humanities and social sciences no longer seek” (Marty 1983: 83). The new nonscientific agenda that he and others envisioned for the AAR was that of a capacious “religious conversation” that would make religion and religion scholars a positive resource for the resolution of social and political problems in society and properly prepare students for citizenship and life in the public square, an agenda that was formally adopted a decade later in the “findings” of an “AAR Self-Study Committee.” The AAR in a sense, therefore, carries forward the broad “salvific” agenda of the NABI insofar as its leadership understands the primary work of the Academy to be that of bringing unity among the religions as an avenue to peace and prosperity to society, locally and globally. Although ensconced in the academy—in departments of Religious Studies in colleges and universities—it is obvious that its intentions are not primarily scientific or scholarly; any such claims are merely an avenue for achieving broader religious and political goals.  

9 This is clearly evident in the list of goals for the Academy found in the 1993 “AAR Self-Study Committee Findings” (Part I and II) as reported in Religious Studies News (DeConcini et al., 1993a and b). Barbara DeConcini, the Executive Director of the Academy at the time, “justified” this state of affairs by insisting that it is no longer possible to assume “a clear distinction separating scholarship from advocacy,” claiming (in an interview with Warren Frisinia) that this situation demands that the Academy support an inclusive conversation of “the various voices in the field of religion” (Frisinia, 1993a: 5). The AAR’s “Central Strategic Plan (2004–2010)” is even more explicit
Clearly, then, the leaders (charismatic and institutional) have forgotten, or deliberately ignored, the reasons for the very existence of the “Ivory Tower” and the obligations that membership in it brings. As Stanley Fish puts it, [in a New York Times column, “Why We Built the Ivory Tower” (2004)], they have an obligation, not to “confuse [our] academic obligations with the obligation to save the world; that’s not [our] job as . . . academic[s]. . . .” He continues his advice to those in the academy: “[D]on’t surrender your academic obligations to the agenda of any non-academic constituency—parents, legislators, trustees or donors. In short, don’t cross the boundary between academic work and partisan advocacy, whether the advocacy is yours or someone else’s.”

The AAR, as the addresses of its elected leaders indicate, prides itself on providing the framework for an open, capacious, inclusivist, scholarly conversation on religion. As has been amply noted, it wishes to include all religious views in a kind of colloquy. What it does not want to do, however, is to include the scientific voice in that conversational mix, despite its claim of commitment to academically respectable scholarship and despite the contributions some of its members (and constituent program sections) make to it. It has, consequently, deliberately excluded or seriously marginalized the scientific voices—that is, those scholars who wish to undertake an objective, neutral, and disinterested study of religion and religious phenomena. And it has done so, it seems, because it has “bought” the argument of the postmodernists to the effect that reason and scientific thought are themselves essentially ideological. That argument, however, is simply not persuasive.

about its religio-political goals; its “Mission” statement reads as follows: “In a world where religion plays so central a role in social, political, and economic events, as well as in the lives of communities and individuals, there is a critical need for ongoing reflection upon and understanding of religious traditions, issues, questions, and values. The AAR’s mission is to promote such reflection through excellence in scholarship and teaching.” And that mission, it is pointed out in bold letters, involves the following “strategic objective” (number five): “To foster the scholarly interaction among all approaches to the study of religion, including the ethical and theological perspectives that arise within particular religious traditions. Our objective is to welcome reflection from within and among particular religious traditions into our conversation.” (See http://www.aarweb.org/about/strategicplan/2004.asp).

10 In his Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change (1995) he advises literary critics who want to get beyond the professionalization of their field and who wish to be heard beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower to get out of the university. For him, being a public intellectual “is not a job for which academics, as academics, are particularly qualified” (125). John Ellis (1997) similarly argues in his Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities that adoption of social agendas can only lead to the subversion of the humanities.
MISSING VOICES?

Although it is not possible here to provide a detailed critique of postmodern claims in this respect, or to elaborate a detailed account of what a scientific study of religion appropriate to the academic (university) context amounts to, it is nevertheless necessary to provide some brief response to these matters here if my criticism of the marginalization or eclipse of the scientific study of religion within the framework of the AAR is not to be dismissed out of hand.

For many scholars in the AAR, the marginalization of explanatory and theoretical approaches to understanding religions and religion is simply indicative of a successful postmodern revolution in the academy at large (see my reference to Tracy above), and little thought is given to whether this amounts to a gain or loss for the field of Religious Studies. Moreover, few scholars take the time to analyze that so-called postmodern revolution critically. But there is considerable evidence and argument, from diverse sources, that neither postmodern theory nor the work of the social studies of science scholars undermines the epistemic/cognitive authority of science and the sciences. The philosopher Philip Kitcher (1993), for example, provides cogent argument in his *The Advancement of Science: Science Without Legend, Objectivity Without Illusions* that even though postmodernists have lodged significant criticism against the Enlightenment notion of science, the modern view of science has not been undermined. As he puts it: “Flawed people working in complex social environments, moved by all kinds of interests have collectively achieved a vision of parts of nature that is broadly progressive, and that rests on arguments meeting standards that have been refined and improved over the centuries” (Kitcher 1993: 390). And in *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (2004), historian John H. Zammito more recently has shown that the constraints and demands of empirical science cannot be as easily subverted as postmoderns believe. His history reconstructs what he calls the three hyperbolic dogmas of “anti-empiricism” that have dominated postmodern theory throughout this period, namely, theory-ladenness, underdetermination, and incommensurability. And he has shown that “[n]one is justified in the radical form which alone empowers the extravagances of postmodernism” (Zammito 2004: 271). Consequently, he claims, these criticisms do not justify the denigration of science that postmodernists have heaped upon it, and “real philosophers,” he insists, “have increasingly taken a deflationary view of their authority over the empirical disciplines” (Zammito 2004: 3). Although he does not deny that the postmodern theorists have something to teach us, he nevertheless contends “that it is time to take up
a more moderate historicism” (Zammito 2004: 5), and he points out that after the extravagant postmodern claims are dispelled, what remains will be “fully assimilable into—not preemptive of—empirical inquiry” (Zammito 2004: 2). His concluding paragraph is worth quoting in full here:

There has been a derangement of epistemes. Philosophy of science pursued ‘semantic ascent’ into a philosophy of language so ‘holistic’ as to deny determinate purchase on the world of which we speak. History and sociology of science has become so ‘reflexive’ that it has plunged ‘all the way down’ into the abîme of an almost absolute scepticism. In that light, my fears are for empirical inquiry not in the natural sciences, whose practitioners brush all this off as impertinences, but in the human sciences. Hyperbolic ‘theory’ threatens especially the prospect of learning anything from others that we did not already presume. It is time for a hard reckoning, for a rigorous deflation. Willard Quine put it with uncharacteristic bluntness: ‘To disavow the very core of common sense, to require evidence for that which both the physicist and the man in the street accepts as platitudinous, is no laudable perfectionism; it is a pompous confusion’. “(Zammito 2004: 275)

Finally, in Science of Science and Reflexivity, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2001) also sets out to mitigate the effects of the postmodern attack on science, which he sees as a regressive development. A proper understanding of the historical sciences, he insists, demands a more moderate historicism than that which the postmodernists promote. “Having left philosophy for sociology...,” he writes, “I was bound, as an aspiring scientist, to remain committed to the rationalist vision—rather than simply using the social sciences, like Foucault or Derrida, so as to reduce or destroy them, while practising them, without saying so and without paying the price of a genuine conversion to the constraints and demands of empirical research” (Bourdieu 2001: 106). Positively, his project here is to submit “science to a historical and sociological analysis that in no way seeks to relativize scientific knowledge by relating and reducing it to its historical conditions” (Bourdieu 2001: vii). Quite to the contrary, he maintains that scientific truth can survive radical historicization; that what he calls a “scientific field” “can be the historical site where trans-historical truths are produced” (Bourdieu 2001: 69). Understanding science as a field and a habitus, he claims, will prevent the subordination of the social mechanisms that made science possible in the first place to external goals foreign to science’s objectives. Thus he writes: “If there is one area where it can be assumed that agents act in accordance with conscious, calculated intentions, following consciously devised methods and programmes, it is indeed the domain of science” (Bourdieu 2001: 38). According to Bourdieu, therefore, it is through such an account
of science, which breaks with what he calls logicist and scientistic visions of science, that one can “give a scientific account of scientific reason, to rescue scientific reason from relativistic reduction, and explain how science can constantly progress towards more rationality without having to appeal to some kind of founding miracle” (Bourdieu 2001: 54).

I have presented a more substantial response to the postmodern critiques of science in “A Positive Episteme for the Study of Religion” (1985), “Why the Academic Study of Religion? Motive and Method in the Study of Religion” (1988), “Dissolving Rationality: The Anti-Science Phenomenon and Its Implications for the Study of Religion” (1997), and “Appropriating Religion: Understanding Religion as an Object of Science” (1999) and will not, therefore, pursue this matter further here. It may be appropriate, however, to summarize my understanding of what a scientific study of religion appropriate to the academic context (repeatedly referred to in this article as a search for neutral and objective knowledge about religion and religions) involves. By “scientific” I mean essentially that the study of religion in the context of the modern research university aims at achieving what we might call “public knowledge of public facts,” mediated through intersubjectively testable sets of statements, whether at the descriptive level of history, ethnography, and phenomenology, or at the explanatory level of law-like generalizations and theory. This, basically, is what scientific students of religion consider objective knowledge claims to be, because for them, the intersubjective procedures of assessing and testing claims ensures that the student avoids idiosyncratic subjective bias in the claims she or he makes. By “disinterested” and “neutral” knowledge claims, therefore, I refer to the fact that the scientific approach to the study of religion deliberately works to free itself from religio-theological, humanistic, moral, social, political, and all other similar agendas in an attempt to obtain such disinterested knowledge about religion. In other words, it is assumed that in the academic study of religion the language of the scholar of religion, like that of students of the social sciences, must be no more “self-involving” than the languages of physics, chemistry, and the other natural sciences. Thus the work of the academic/scientific student of religion must be structurally and methodologically indistinguishable from the other sciences and “live up to” the ordinary intellectual obligations to which they are subject. A science of religion, therefore, is not an autonomous enterprise that is ultimately free from the constraints of the other sciences but must rather recognize them as constituting “boundary conditions” that affect the range of theories of religion reasonably open to the Religious Studies enterprise. That is, those theories will have to locate themselves within what might be called an “integrated causal model” of the sciences and, consequently, will be “reductionistic” in that they will attempt
to explain “the supernatural” naturalistically. All explanatory and theoretical accounts of religion within the Religious Studies framework, therefore, will have to fall within the same conceptual and causal framework used to explain all other elements and aspects of the natural and social worlds.

Even a casual perusal of the work of many members of the AAR will reveal that in accounting for one or another aspect of religious traditions and religious behavior they operate with essentially the same assumptions spelled out here: they attempt, that is, to avoid both idiosyncratic subjectivity and “self-involving discourse” in their work and so seek what we colloquially refer to as objective knowledge (that is, intersubjectively testable knowledge claims). It is difficult, therefore, to understand why the AAR largely excludes from its leadership, and continues to discourage within its membership, those who wish to expand that same framework in search of an explanatory understanding of religion and religiosity, especially, while it at the same time undertakes new religious initiatives like that in support of theological education.11 Such a stance strikes one as peculiar, if not incoherent, of a professional association that presents itself as an “umbrella” organization interested in representing all approaches to the study of religion found in our college and university departments of Religious Studies.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the substance and import of the presidential addresses provided here, I think it fair to say that, for the most part, the elected leadership of the AAR is still fundamentally committed to making a religious voice heard both on college and on university campuses as well as in society at large, and that in this, the leadership of the AAR still reflects the intentions and aims of the NABI. Although from time to time presidents of the AAR like Claude Welch (1970), William A. Clebsch (1981), and Catherine Albanese (1994) have exhorted the Academy’s members not to give up a commitment to scholarly aims and goals, the AAR, it must be acknowledged, keeps returning to and embracing the earlier, religious, aspirations of the NABI. This is not to say that nothing of scholarly or

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11 I have in mind here the “Theological Programs Initiative” undertaken by the AAR, which, according to Cary J. Gifford, Director of the Program, is directed toward creating “new services, programs, and resources that the AAR might offer the theological education community” (Gifford 2005: 10). Six regional meetings are being held, as the Religious Studies News cover headline puts it, “to assess the needs of the theological educator.” Although this is reasonable insofar as the AAR sees itself as an umbrella organization, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine the AAR undertaking a similar initiative to assess the needs of those engaged in the scientific study of religions and religion or of the AAR giving consideration to providing the latter group of scholars “services, programs, and resources.”
scientific value is produced by members of the AAR. I wish only to bring clearly into view that the official aim of the AAR is not primarily scientific or scholarly but rather to ensure that the religious conversation on American campuses endures and supplements the other religious voices that thrive outside the curriculum and classroom.

APPENDIX

Presidential Addresses to the American Academy of Religion, 1994–2003 (All were published in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion.)

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