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Sitting on the bench: is the cognitive and evolutionary study of religion a team sport?

A Response to Wesley J. Wildman on “Modelling Religion and the Integration of the Sciences and the Humanities in the Bio-cultural Study of Religion”

By Leonardo Ambasciano

The grand challenge of cross-disciplinary integration

Cognitive Science (CS) has always been *interdisciplinary* and *multidisciplinary*. As recapped by William Bechtel, Adele Abrahamsen, and George Graham (2001), since the very beginning, CS aimed at integrating perspectives and methods by tearing down the walls between fields (such as Artificial Intelligence, psycholinguistics, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind) to approach in a scientific way the mechanisms of both cognition and agency. Loyal to such open-mindedness, and thanks to an ever-expanding collection of disciplinary tools and technologies apt to extend the boundaries of analysis and understanding, CS has realised an epistemologically sound and

consilient *cross*-disciplinary integration as the result of a similarly *cross*-disciplinary research.

This was no easy task. Indeed, the most complex integration occurs when grand challenges, once thought to be unapproachable (or even unthought of because of the very evolvability of scientific research itself), are concerned with the “breaking of the [institutional] pattern into which [researchers] had crystallised” (paraphrasing Snow 1961: 42). Grand challenges, such as the scientific study of the human mind, usually involve significant social, financial, epistemological, and methodological issues all at once, depending on the scale and magnitude of the *multidisciplinary* questions involved.

Philosophers of science Michael O’Rourke, Stephen Crowley, and Chad Gonnerman have recently pointed out that “successful responses to grand challenges will require cross-disciplinary integration, but constructive combination of different perspectives can be undermined if collaborators conceive of integration differently” (O’Rourke, Crowley & Gonnerman 2016: 70). In the case of the latest addition to the CS family, i.e., the CS of religion (or CSR), effective integration with historiography has been hindered by what seems like a reciprocal poor understanding, and an even poorer knowledge, of the respective disciplinary epistemology and methodologies.

Wheels, biases, and interdisciplinary collaboration

In his [RSP interview](#) delivered in the wake of the 2017 Moore Lecture held at the University of Otago (New Zealand), Wesley Wildman, professor at the School of

Theology, Boston University, and founder of the [Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion](#), recalls the Snowian necessity for the CSR to break pre-existing boundaries between the “two cultures,” and points out the need for combining the results into a synthetic perspective, which he labels as “the biocultural study of religion.” In his own words, “these days the scientific study of religion is a team sport.” Wildman also notes “how fast empirical sciences have been making their contribution,” citing anthropology, sociology, psychology, and medicine as parts of a greater biocultural, experimental, quantitative, and cultural evolutionary CSR (or CSR 2.0). As Wildman adds, grand challenges [1] are unapproachable – or even unthinkable – without an adequate scientific literacy. Scientific input is paramount to develop and pursue research trajectories which might become potential answers to interdisciplinary grand challenges, and the study of religion, being an extremely complicated and naturally interdisciplinary topic, *must* deal with science. The main issues that might prevent such integration, according to Wildman, are, on the one hand, the negligence towards “the history of the study of religion from the Humanities side,” which leads to “wooden’ interpretations” and to useless “reinvent[ions of the] wheel,” and, on the other hand, the insecurities and ideological biases against STEM research from Humanities scholars.

Even though Wildman sincerely acknowledges his “fairly depressing experience” as founding editor of the academic journal [Religion, Brain & Behavior](#), specifically with regards to the neglect of historiographical knowledge, nothing more than a good will to take part in a team – plus some suggestions virtually prone to

confirmation bias (“use methods that are useful”) – is offered. Indeed, despite the deep philosophical roots of the first wave of CSR (see Martin & Wiebe 2017), at present no agreed-upon, interdisciplinary, and shared protocol is available to CSR 2.0 students and scholars so that they can avoid biases, prevarications, and abuses while mastering beforehand how to kickstart a fruitful interdisciplinary collaboration. In this sense, a philosophically informed “integration process” and a “communicative integration” aimed at harmonising and combining inputs from different disciplines, while creating a disambiguated common ground *prior* to any potential collaboration, should help boosting connectivity among all the branches involved in CSR 2.0 (as highlighted in O’Rourke, Crowley & Gonnerman 2016: 68). Yet, this goal cannot be achieved without implementing a research project as well as a long-term, strategical commitment to epistemology.

History and epistemology: neglect at your own risk

Anyway, Wildman has struck the right chord here. It is not uncommon to read vilifying or naïve judgements in the recent CSR 2.0 literature about the alleged impotence of historiographical research. Even more astoundingly, sometimes historiography is simply and altogether forgotten (a topic which I have tackled and commented upon in Ambasciano 2016 and Ambasciano 2017). These reactions might be understandable in the light of previous historiographical approaches which resulted in disciplinary autoreferentiality, dead-ends, or failures (such as postmodernism, psychohistory, or phenomenological trends in the history of religions of old), but to extend such

legitimate critiques to the whole of history as a discipline is to commit a fallacy of composition and a hasty generalisation. Not to mention that, as Wildman hints at, to approach the study of the past from the perspective of psychology, or social sciences flattened on the present, risks to spread an even more nefarious fallacy of presentism (or *nunc pro tunc* fallacy).

Finally, when Wildman approaches the most recent developments concerning history in CSR 2.0, he correctly identifies a sort of paradigm shift in the widespread diffusion of Big Data approaches and huge, digital databanks dedicated to the quantitative test of competing historiographical theories about the human past. However, as noted by Edward Slingerland (2014: 124), this move has put history into a corner, from which historians and their works are being momentarily summoned whenever they are needed to hand over their knowledge. Although the most recent collaborative projects in the field seem to have reached a better awareness of the issue, the existence of this attitude betrays a still biased and quite simplistic approach to history and historiography. Most importantly, this *modus operandi* opens a can of worms related to a whole array of overlooked issues, from method and theory in the coding of historical datasets, to the unaccounted-for role of taphonomic bias and qualitative distortions potentially affecting mathematical modelling, *inter alia*. The predominance of such a method in CSR 2.0 reinforces the striking lack of familiarity with updated historical knowledge, and results in the worrying unconcern for psychological diversity which prevents researchers from correctly approaching such topic in past cultures and religions.

The scientific study of history (of religions and cultures)

It is undeniable that, among the most widespread trends, the postmodern inclination for antiscientific and revisionist stances has tainted the Humanities, and the historical study of culture/s and religion/s, in a pernicious way. But this is no justification for ignoring the field. Postmodernist excesses represent nothing more than a mere – although admittedly influential – disciplinary fragment. Indeed, as the impressive research of Rens Bod has recently shown (2015), the main tools of the scientific method (such as research of patterns, scepticism, empirical approach, etc.) constitute a set of cognitive and social tools honed and shared by *both* sciences and the better part of the Humanities. It should not be a surprise, then, to remark that the scientific study of history has a prestigious academic past. Once hailed as *the* research breakthrough of the *Annales* school of historiography (see Burguière 2009), quantitative models and *intradisciplinary* attention to *extradisciplinary* integration have been recently reinvigorated by expanding the study of socio-cultural patterns with the inclusion of developmental, environmental, evolutionary, neurophysiological, and geo-historical factors (a commented bibliography is available in Ambasciano forthcoming). Alas, almost none of these studies is usually taken into consideration by the quantitative branches of CSR 2.0.

While Wildman is right about the need for a thorough scientific literacy within the Humanities, a much more urgent task (if we consider the sheer amount of grants and widespread diffusion of certain Big Data approaches) would be the mastering of a

sufficient historiographical literacy by those researchers involved in the “cognition-based social-scientific [enquiry] in historical research” (Martin 2014: 273). The history of the historical sciences (i.e., cosmology, geology, palaeontology, evolutionary biology, [palaeo]anthropology, cultural geography, epidemiology, linguistics, philology, and, of course, historiography) reveals epistemologically sound methods and theories necessary to remove the stumbling blocks which prevent cross-disciplinary integration between CSR 2.0, historiography, and philosophy of science (see Ambasciano 2017). CS – like science in general – has always been *interdisciplinary* and *multidisciplinary*. There is no need to reinvent the wheel when ready-to-use wheels of the right size are available right next door.

Note

[1] While “Big Questions” as a syntagma has been co-opted by the *John Templeton Foundation* for their own projects

(e.g., <https://www.bigquestionsonline.com/>; <https://www.templeton.org/funding-areas/science-big-questions>), “grand challenges,” as pointed out here, enjoys a clearer philosophical definition free from ideological branding (see Wiebe 2009).

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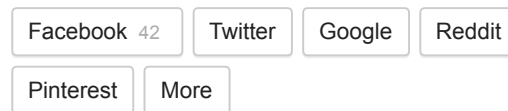
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