

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Engaging the Deeper Shifts: Content Expansion and Scientific Engagement

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z5626vm>

Journal

Religious Studies Review, 50(1)

ISSN

0319-485X

Author

Taves, Ann

Publication Date

2024-03-01

DOI

10.1111/rsr.17069

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Invited essay for forthcoming Special Issue of Religious Studies Review 50/1 titled “Religious Studies Whither and Why?”

Engaging the Deeper Shifts -- Content Expansion and Scientific Engagement

Keywords: consilience, worldviews, evolution, explanation, research design

Author: *Ann Taves*
University of California at Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3130

One way to think about change in the discipline is to consider the various “turns” it has taken. In a recent review of a potential “normative turn,” Stausberg et al. (2023) listed many others, including the performative, spatial, aesthetical, material, queer, critical, and digital turns. These “turns,” which are largely perspectival, are characteristic of humanities disciplines, where new theoretical perspectives provide one of the traditional means of offering something original. I would expect these turns to continue, each having a brief period of prominence and then fading as a new turn captures our scholarly attention. There are, however, deeper shifts that I have witnessed over the course of my career that I expect will persist and, in doing so, will have an enduring impact on the discipline. The two that stand out for me are (1) the expansion in the content of the discipline, that is, the expansion of what scholars find relevant to study under the rubric of “religious studies,” and (2) the increased engagement with the sciences and the related efforts to promote greater consilience between the sciences and the humanities.

Expansion of Content

The expansion of content highlights the question of what counts as “religion,” i.e., as the subject matter of our discipline. I can use my own subfield to illustrate. When I was in graduate school in the early 1980s, my subfield was going through a transition from Church History to the History of Christianity and, with respect to the US context, from American Church History to American Religious History. Church History traditionally meant the history of the Christian churches in Europe. What counted as relevant was largely determined by the affiliation of the historian writing the history. Other “branches” of the Christian “tree” were pruned to create a narrative that ran from the beginning to the branch(es) that were prioritized. American Church History continued the narrative into the American context.

By way of contrast, the History of Christianity, as many of us conceived it, was the history of those who called themselves Christians. This shifted the determination of what counted as relevant from ecclesiastical bodies to individuals and groups that considered themselves Christians. Neither Catholics nor Mormons were part of the Protestant-dominated church histories, though both had their own church histories, but they clearly were part of the history of Christianity. American Religious History went beyond those who considered themselves Christian to include those who were religious.

Self-identification works well for those who explicitly consider themselves or their groups as religions or religious. Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims all clearly count. New

religious movements that develop church-like organizational forms, such as Christian Science, or form religious communities, such as the Shakers, the Hutterites, and the Oneida Community, clearly count as well. Self-identification doesn't work as well for groups that characterize themselves as spiritual, metaphysical or occult, refuse to think of themselves as religions or religious, and adopt unchurch-like organizational forms. Researchers are left to debate whether fraternal orders, such as the Masons, that have a lodge structure centered on esoteric rituals, are part of American religious history. Then there are the esoteric groups – the Theosophists, the Golden Dawn, and the Anthroposophical Society – that adopted the lodge structure. What about the metaphysical healers, such as Edgar Cayce, who worked independently, or the new age healers that have adopted medical models of professional organization and training? What about those, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, who adopted a small group structure derived from Protestantism or the Spiritualists who organized around seances? None of these groups want to call themselves religions or their practices religious.

Many religious studies scholars do not worry too much about including whatever groups or individuals strike *them* as religious (or spiritual) under the rubric of religious studies. Some even go so far as to include the study of atheism, non-religion, and/or secularity under the umbrella of religious studies. Doing so, however, raises questions for a discipline, such as religious studies, that is focused on a topic. Are we responsible – as some argue (Tweed 2006, 29–53) – for defining religion (our “constitutive term”) and, thus, for defining what falls under the purview of religious studies? Or should we focus on how people use religion\’s, religious and other related concepts, e.g., esoteric, magic, spiritual, to define and distinguish between themselves and others? If we choose the first course our definitions may obscure groups that do not fit our scholarly definitions, yet nonetheless consider themselves religious. If we choose the latter course, our focus shifts from religions\’s to the processes whereby groups and/or individuals define themselves, characterize their experiences, and position themselves in relation to others. The latter option takes us beyond religious studies into an interdisciplinary space and subsumes the study of religion under a broader rubric.

Over thirty years ago, I chose the latter course, first, with respect to the study of experiences (Taves 1999; 2009) and then, more recently with respect to the formation of groups (Taves 2016) and worldviews (Taves 2020). In each case, the choice entailed a shift from a researcher-defined object of study -- religious experience, new religious movements, or religions – to a more generic object of study that could be appraised in a variety of ways. Doing so positioned my objects of study in an interdisciplinary space and allowed me to focus on how and why people understood their experience, group, or way of life the way that they did. In doing so, however, I wasn't interested in all sorts of experiences, movements, or worldviews, but in those instances where people struggled to determine whether an experience or an event was revelatory or mundane, a sign of divine intervention or of madness, and an occasion to set apart and memorialize or to let fade from memory. These questions emerge out of my training and immersion in the discipline to which I was (and am) still theoretically “tethered” (Taves 2021; see also Seiwert 2020; 2021).

This expansion of the content of the discipline raises fundamental questions for the discipline. At what point does it no longer make sense to call what we are doing “religious studies” or ourselves “scholars of religion”? I was able to let this question slide until scholars began subsuming the study of nonreligion and secularity under the rubric of religious studies. Although nonreligion and secularity are conceptually tethered to religion and, thus, a case can be made for studying them as part of religious studies, my desire to compare them led me to search for a theoretical framework that would encompass both in a more evenhanded fashion.

The worldviews framework that I and Egil Asprem developed to do this integrated two extant approaches: the systematic approach, which centers on responses to fundamental worldview questions (aka “big questions”), and the cognitive-behavioral approach, which focuses on the processes that give rise to behaviors that express worldviews. If we think of worldviews as subjective representations of the environment, then the first approach focuses on “worlds-made” and the second on “world-making” (Taves 2022). As William Paden pointed out some time ago, all living things use their evolved capacities to sense their environment and, in that sense, to create worlds. Thus, he argued,

In the broadest sense there are as many worlds as there are species; all living things select and sense ‘the way things are’ through their own organs and modes of activity. They constellate the environment in terms of their own needs, sensory system, and values. They see – or smell or feel – what they need to, and everything else may as well not exist. A world, of whatever set of creatures, is defined by this double process of selection and exclusion. (Paden 1988, 52).

Building on his insight and the crucial distinction he makes between *worlds* constructed by the senses and *the environment* that exists independent of those who are sensing it, we realized that Paden’s approach challenged us to think of world-making from an evolutionary perspective as a process whereby mobile organisms made sense of their environment based on their evolved capacities (Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018). We realized that even the simplest mobile organism must distinguish between itself and the world in its own way and act in accord with basic goals, such as survival and reproduction, and thus implicitly answer basic questions, such as: (1) What exists in the world as I have evolved to perceive it? (2) What is ‘me’ and ‘not me’? (3) What is the good or goal for which I should strive? and (4) What actions should I take?

Approaching worldviews in terms of ‘big questions’ offered an evenhanded basis for comparing religious and non-religious “worldviews” or “worlds made.” Approaching world-making from an evolutionary perspective offered a theoretical rationale for viewing ‘lived’ or ‘enacted’ worldviews as prior to rationalized or systematized worldviews (aka philosophies and religions). In short:

Grounding worldview expression in an evolutionary perspective upends the usual top-down approaches that assume that the highly developed and systematized worldviews of philosophers and theologians are the standard from which ‘lived worldviews’ have departed. Working from the bottom up, it makes more sense to think of worldviews as explicitly articulated and elaborated on a need-to-know basis not only in response to

‘crises of meaning,’ but also in light of local views of what should be passed on to whom and in what manner. (Taves, Asprem, and Ihm 2018, 212)

Creating a framework that allowed us to shift between analyzing the agent-based process of “world-making” and analysis of the worlds humans have made allowed us to connect the largely unconscious processing of sensory information studied by scientists with the analysis of the reflective, systematized worldviews studied by scholars in the humanities. Doing so helped us to see the important role that “lived” and “enacted” worldviews play in everyday human life.

Engaging the Sciences

The rise of the cognitive and evolutionary study of religion has generated a new interest in bridging between the humanities and the natural sciences (biology, psychology, and neuroscience) alongside with the more traditional efforts to connect with social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology. This more expansive engagement with the sciences has given rise to renewed efforts to promote consilience between the humanities and the sciences.

Many scholars in the humanities reacted negatively to sociobiologist E.O. Wilson’s (1975; 1999) initial call for consilience, assuming – probably correctly – that he envisioned a one-way street that risked subsuming the humanities into the sciences rather than building bridges between them. More recent efforts to promote consilience – nicknamed the “second wave” -- are aiming to develop “a new, shared framework for the sciences and humanities” (Slingerland and Collard 2011, 4) that does not privilege one over the other, as we attempted to do with respect to worldviews. Three aspects of this overall effort stand out: the importance of grounding the humanities in an evolutionary perspective, the call to generate testable hypotheses rather than simply arguing for theories, and the need to incorporate explanation in addition to description and interpretation.

The importance of grounding the humanities in an evolutionary perspective.

The discipline rightly reacted against the cultural evolutionary schemas of the late nineteenth century, which, despite the efforts of Bellah (1964) and Geertz (1973) to approach evolution differently, was still received orthodoxy in the 1990s when I began teaching classical theorists, such as Tylor, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Beginning in the nineties and gathering momentum in the aughts, an emerging network of scholars – the majority from outside the discipline – who were interested in pursuing cognitive and evolutionary approaches to the study of religion adopted modern evolutionary theory as a foundational theoretical framework (Boyer 2001; Atran and Norenzayan 2004; Bulbulia 2004; Boyer and Bergstrom 2008; Bulbulia et al. 2008; D. S. Wilson and Green 2012). JZ Smith’s positive response to the publication of Robert Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) in an author-meets-critics session at the American Academy of Religion, marked a turning point within the discipline (Juergensmeyer et al. 2011). Smith’s response was remarkable not only in light of his stature in the field, but also given the harsh criticism he had leveled at Bellah’s initial efforts to consider a more modern approach (Juergensmeyer 2013).

As is the case with the study of religion more broadly, scholars can choose to focus, as Bellah did, on religion or, as I have done, on the evolution of something more encompassing, such as experiencing or worldmaking or, more generally, meaning making. In my own work on experience, I began to think in more evolutionary and developmental terms at the point where I sought to overcome the disciplinary tendency to assume that it was impossible to study experience apart from the way it is represented in and shaped by discourse. That elicited my first comparison of adult humans with infants and other animals, who I argued, surely experienced things (at the level of first-order or primary consciousness) even if they could not think or talk about what they were experiencing (Taves 2009, 56–61).

Both experiencing and worldmaking involve making sense (or meaning) of the events that occur in the environment in which we exist. Thinking in these broad terms opens all sorts of interesting questions, for example: How much of the human meaning making processes is reflective or even conscious and how much takes place below the threshold of awareness? What constraints on the process are built into our evolved nature as human animals? When in human evolution can we start to think in terms of codified, rationalized worldviews (including religions) as opposed to ways of life?

The call to test hypotheses instead of simply arguing for theories.

The rise of the cognitive science of religion, while largely theoretical at the outset, was premised the idea that theories about religion could and should be turned into testable hypotheses and tested to see if they held up. For example, in his cognitive theory of religion, Boyer (1994) hypothesized that the recurrence of claims regarding the existence of nonobservable entities in very different cultural environments was due to cognitive “constraints on acquisition.” Barrett and Keil (1996) thought that Boyer’s theory seemed more applicable to ghosts, ancestors, and other post-mortal beings that can be classed with their living counterparts than to religions that officially assign God to a different ontological category than people. To test whether Boyer’s hypothesis applied to believers’ conceptions of God, Barrett and Keil used a story processing task, which revealed that, when believers didn’t have time to reflect, they often drew upon anthropomorphic God concepts – of the sort that Boyer would have predicted – that were inconsistent with their stated theological beliefs.

Some years later, Harvey Whitehouse offered scholars of religion the most visible demonstration of what hypothesis testing might involve. In the concluding chapter of his cognitive theory of religious transmission, he explicitly spelled out the predictions he would make based on the hypotheses advanced in the book and called on experts in anthropology, history, and archeology to help test them (Whitehouse 2004, 157–70). The result was a series of edited volumes in which a wide range of scholars took up that task (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004; Whitehouse and Martin 2004; Whitehouse and McCauley 2005).

In many ways, the call to test hypotheses was CSR’s most radical break with research traditions in the humanities and a key component of its quest for consilience. Was it possible, these researchers asked, to generate cumulative knowledge with respect to topics, such as

religion, that were not traditionally studied with that aim in mind? This shift in thinking was one for which most scholars in the humanities were not prepared. In the absence of an overall framework for bridging between the sciences and humanities, the call for testable hypotheses met with resistance or simply a lack of understanding on the part of many in the humanities. The underlying issue, and the central issue that such a framework must address, has to do with the nature of explanation.

The need incorporate explanation in addition to description and interpretation.

Although explanatory theories had long been part of the study of religion (for an overview, see Preus 1996), CSR researchers stressed the importance of explaining various features of religions in light of the evolved mental and biological capacities of humans and, to some extent, other animals as well (Lawson and McCauley 1990; Sperber 1996; Boyer 2001). This call raised theoretical and methodological questions that most scholars of religion (and humanities scholars more generally) were not well-prepared to address:

- How is understanding and interpretation, which has long been central to work in the humanities, related to explanation, which is central to research in the sciences, in the actual practice of doing research?
- What does it mean to explain human behavior in the context of the biological, psychological, and human sciences? What do scientists mean when they refer to explanatory “mechanisms”?

This lack of preparation was due in part to the tendency to approach research design and research methods by reading and imitating the design and method of exemplary studies. Until Stausberg and Engler (2011) published the first edition of the *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, the field lacked the sort of explicit discussion of research methods that is common in the sciences. Moreover, it was only with the publication of the second edition (Engler and Stausberg 2022), that the *Handbook* included a chapter on research design modeled on those that are common in the sciences. In that chapter (Taves and Paloutzian 2022), we located research design within the overall research process, used comparison to test the thesis that the fundamental comparative logic that tacitly undergirds all research is the same whether the research is done in the sciences or the humanities, and developed terminology appropriate for specifying designs in the humanities. The chapter explicitly addressed the difference between interpretive and explanatory designs and encouraged scholars to adopt a two-step design if they want to both interpret a phenomenon (the first step) and explain it (the second step).

Explicit discussion of research design lays the foundation for enhanced consilience between the sciences and the humanities, but it does not provide a framework for understanding what it means to explain human behavior in the biological, psychological, and human sciences. Although CSR researchers have stressed the importance of “fractionating” or “decomposing” religious systems into aspects that seem to recur across cultures (White 2021, 32–35, 242–43), they have not grounded their approach in the philosophy of science and, thus, in an overall

understanding of explanatory mechanisms (see Visala 2022, 43–44). The “building block approach,” which Egil Asprem and I have been developing over the past decade or so, is a contribution to “second-wave consilience.” In keeping with it, we distinguish between different explanatory levels, incorporate both interpretation and explanation, and offer a framework that links the sciences and humanities, recognizing the strengths and limitations of each. The framework is premised on the work of the “new mechanists” in the philosophy of science. Their work formalizes assumptions about both explanation and mechanism that are prevalent in the natural sciences (biology, neuroscience, and psychology), which we extend to work in the humanities.

Conclusion

In light of the trends toward expanding our subject matter and increased engagement with the sciences, I think that Departments of Religious Studies should devote more explicit attention to research design and research methods. Graduate students should also have some exposure to discussions of explanation in the philosophy of science and an awareness of frameworks that are designed to promote consilience between the humanities and the natural and human sciences. Courses on classical theorists of religion should include Darwin alongside figures such as Tylor, Marx, Freud, Durkheim, and Weber.

REFERENCES

- Atran, Scott, and Ara Norenzayan. 2004. “Religion’s Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion.” *Behav Brain Sci* 27 (6): 713–30; discussion 730–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X04000172>.
- Barrett, J. L., and F. C. Keil. 1996. “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts.” *Cogn Psychol* 31 (3): 219–47. <https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.1996.0017>.
- Bellah, Robert N. 1964. “Religious Evolution.” *American Sociological Review* 29 (3): 358–74.
- . 2011. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Boyer, Pascal. 1994. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Nachdr. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Boyer, Pascal, and Brian Bergstrom. 2008. “Evolutionary Perspectives on Religion.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (1): 111–30. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.37.081407.085201>.
- Bulbulia, Joseph. 2004. “The Cognitive and Evolutionary Psychology of Religion.” *Biology and Philosophy* 19: 655–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-005-5568-6>.
- Bulbulia, Joseph, Richard Sosis, Erica Harris, Russell Genet, Cheryl Genet, and Karen Wyman, eds. 2008. *The Evolution of Religion: Studies, Theories, and Critiques*. California: Collins Foundation Press.

- Engler, Steven, and Michael Stausberg, eds. 2022. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. Second edition. Routledge Handbooks in Religion. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 55–83. New York: Basic Books.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2013. "In Memoriam: Robert Neelly Bellah (1927-2013)." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (4): 897–902. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lft057>.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark, Robert N. Bellah, J. Z. Smith, Wendy Doniger, and Luke Timothy Johnson. 2011. "A Conversation with Robert Bellah on 'Religion in Human Evolution.'" In *American Academy of Religion*. San Francisco. <https://youtu.be/bduUUnPUGI?si=8f29KcI06nliurJJ>.
- Lawson, E. Thomas, and Robert N. McCauley. 1990. *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*. Cambridge New York Port Chester [etc.]: Cambridge University Press.
- Paden, William E. 1988. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Preus, James S. 1996. *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press.
- Seiwert, Hubert. 2020. "Theory of Religion and Historical Research. A Critical Realist Perspective on the Study of Religion as an Empirical Discipline." *Zeitschrift Für Religionswissenschaft* 28 (2): 207–36. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfr-2020-0001>.
- . 2021. "Reply to the Responses." *Zeitschrift Für Religionswissenschaft* 29 (2): 290–98. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfr-2021-0029>.
- Slingerland, Edward, and Mark Collard. 2011. *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and the Humanities*. Oxford University Press.
- Sperber, Dan. 1996. *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell.
- Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler, eds. 2011. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Stausberg, Michael, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Christian Hervik Bull, and Alexander Van Der Haven. 2023. "A Normative Turn in the Study of Religions?: Reflections on Richard Miller's Why Study Religion?" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (1): 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10117>.
- Taves, Ann. 1999. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- . 2016. *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*. First [edition]. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2020. "From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies." *Religion* 50 (1): 137–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681124>.

- . 2021. “Religion, Religious: Can Anti-Definitionalists Stay Tethered to the Study of Religion?” *Zeitschrift Für Religionswissenschaft* 29 (2): 285–89. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfr-2021-0025>.
- . 2022. “Worldview Analysis as a Tool for Conflict Resolution.” *Negotiation Journal*, June, nejo.12403. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12403>.
- Taves, Ann, and Egil Asprem. forthcoming. “The Building Block Approach to Complex Cultural Concepts.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Taves, Ann, Egil Asprem, and Elliott Ihm. 2018. “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10 (3): 207–17. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000201>.
- Taves, Ann, and Raymond F Paloutzian. 2022. “Designing Research.” In *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Tweed, Thomas A. 2006. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Visala, Aku. 2022. “Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Science of Religion.” In *The Oxford Handbook of the Cognitive Science of Religion*, edited by Justin L. Barrett, 1st ed., 27–47. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190693350.001.0001>.
- White, Claire. 2021. *An Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion: Connecting Evolution, Brain, Cognition, and Culture*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge.
- Whitehouse, Harvey. 2004. *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Cognitive Science of Religion Series. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Whitehouse, Harvey, and James Laidlaw, eds. 2004. *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*. Cognitive Science of Religion Series. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.
- Whitehouse, Harvey, and Luther H. Martin, eds. 2004. *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition*. Cognitive Science of Religion Series. Walnut Creek, Calif: AltaMira Press.
- Whitehouse, Harvey, and Robert N. McCauley, eds. 2005. *Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity*. Cognitive Science of Religion Series. Walnut Creek Lanham New York Toronto Oxford: AltaMira Press.
- Wilson, David Sloan, and William Scott Green. 2012. “Evolutionary Religious Studies: A Beginner’s Guide.” In *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and the Humanities*, edited by Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199794393.001.0001>.
- Wilson, Edward O. 1975. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. 25th anniversary ed. Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap press of Harvard university press.
- . 1999. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. 1st Vintage books Ed. New York: Vintage Book.

