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EDITORIAL[1]

SCIENCE OF RELIGION:
what is it, indeed?

CIÊNCIAS DA RELIGIÃO:
o que é isso afinal

CIENCIAS DE LA RELIGIÓN: ¿QUÉ ES, EFECTIVAMENTE?
¿que és, efectivamente?

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Many are the studies on what has been called religion over the centuries. The most ancient studies are associated with theology and philosophy. In many other areas of knowledge, we also find disciplines that study religions. The most widely known are certainly the History of Religion, the Sociology of Religion, the Anthropology of Religion, and the Psychology of Religion. We could also add to this the Geography of Religion, among others more recent. Besides, there are several correlations between different themes and religion, such as art, literature, politics, gender, etc. But, after all, what is the discipline that in Brazil is mostly known as Sciences of Religion?

It is not possible to approach this question without referring to the subject-object of these various studies described above. What do we understand by religion? How to consider

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such object? Certainly, we are very far from achieving a full definition of what is religion. In the etymological sense of the term to the various conceptions arising from the studies about the religious fact, it would be enough for our interest to recognize that it is a very complex reality, observable through its community expression, worship, doctrines, and experiences. As a cultural production, the religious fact is not exhausted in the analysis got under a single bias. Like all human productions, religious fact demands multiple approaches.

Once this principle is on the table, it becomes clear that no area of knowledge will be able to handle the study of religion on its own. Moreover, because of the proper commitments of such areas with their central theme (sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.), the study of religion ends up being approached as a reinforcement to theories outside the religious fact itself. Could religion be reducible to sociological, political, or psychological? As scientists of religion, it seems to us to be somewhat partial and incomplete for the objectives we propose. Nevertheless, all these reflections are extremely relevant and necessary for the scientific work of religion.

To overcome such reduction, we understand the Sciences of Religion as the discipline that develops, articulates, and integrates, according to the interdisciplinary method, the empirical-systematic approaches to the religious fact. The starting-point of this discipline, which must be strictly understood in the academic-scientific field, considers that the study of the religious fact demands a proper method, appropriate to its subject-object, capable of considering the totality of the phenomenon in its constitutive aspects and its interaction with other realities and knowledge. Therefore, scientists of religion are interested in empirically verifiable phenomena.

As a discipline, we recognize the extensive efforts of a hundred and fifty years of academic investigations and efforts that have promoted the consolidation of the Science of Religion discipline method. Although the naming has been diverse since its origins, not only in Brazil but also on an international level, we can recognize, from the proposal of *Religionswissenschaft*, proposed by Friedrich Max Müller, as a guide to the work of scientists of religion. The theoretical-methodological principles of the working method of the Sciences of Religion, considered since the first studies, point, in Joachim Wach's synthesis, to a discipline that develops its studies according to an empirical and a systemic approach. Before moving forward in this aspect, it is important to reinforce that the aim of this discipline is the description and theorization of concrete religious facts: texts, images,

systems of acts, doctrines, regimes of knowledge, collective axiological projects, communities, people, experiences that can be observed.

As highlighted above, the Science of Religion discipline is, on one hand, a discipline of the empirical approach. Its perspective does not match speculation about the value of a given experience, the validity of a professed faith proposition, the internal or external appropriateness of axiological projects, and knowledge regimes of groups or individuals concerning their beliefs. In this sense, the Science of Religion discipline does not develop a normative consideration of its subject-object. Scientists of religion are interested in the practices lived, the objects, the cults, and the process that makes an experience to be taken as a guide to the globality of individual and collective senses.

However, on the other hand, this empirical-descriptive character of our discipline is not enough to meet the requirements of understanding our subject-object. Scientists of religion must challenge the theorizing task of making science, a search for the general. Thus, descriptions of particular phenomena, made according to the empirical-descriptive approach, analyzed from themselves or a comparative perspective, are treated by scientists of religion in a transverse manner, problematizing the description of the particular and pointing out possible relations or approaches in a view of an understanding of the totality of the phenomenon investigated. In this way, the discipline collaborates with its method for the understanding of religious facts. It is important to emphasize that the techniques of empirical-descriptive research and systematic research of religious facts are shared in the great tradition of theoretical-methodological studies of the human and social sciences applied to religious facts.

Considering that the discipline has already been over 150 years, since the mentioned Max Müller's lectures, whose translation into Portuguese, made by Brasil Fernandes de Barros, is available by Editora Senso; considering the history of the consolidation of the discipline since the installation of several academic chairs and centers of studies around the world (in Brazil we have already taken 50 years since the first Department and course of the discipline was established at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora/MG); we should have perhaps already overcome the phase of astonishment regarding the profile and legacy of this discipline in the academic environment and, particularly, in the university environment. Other disciplines with the same consolidation time or just a little more than our discipline are already much better consolidated and have their foundations much more internalized by members of their communities. Even some disciplines identified with the same object, *of*

religion on its names, enjoy a better, defined, and internalized understanding by the academic community. It is not because of a lack of theoretical-methodological delimitation built along with the tradition of the discipline that we notice a certain weakening in the self-understanding of it within the academic community dedicated to the sciences of religion in the country.

Within its national history, we note that the appropriation of the name of the discipline as Sciences of Religion (including the issue of the particularity of the "s" introduced in the term Science in our country) seems not to have been accompanied by the appropriation of its tradition and disciplinary delimitation. The researchers in our area in Brazil have discussed this matter and offered relevant material for the debate. Part of this effort can be found in the book *Epistemologia das Ciências da Religião*, published by Editora CRV. In PUC Minas, at the Religion and Culture Research Group of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies, Prof. Fabiano Campos and I, as well the students Maurílio Ribeiro, Tatiane Almeida, Amanda Alves and Leandro Castro, have been trying to understand this process. We are questioning the interdisciplinary *status* that is not part of a definition of the discipline of the Sciences of Religion. As Tatiane Almeida points out in the work mentioned above, there is no interdisciplinarity outside the discipline. What does this mean for the Sciences of Religion? It seems that it is not possible to advance as a discipline without considering the basic principles, the recognized approaches and the legacy built up by the tradition of theoretical-methodological debates that are proper to it.

It is interesting to note that our discipline is often confused with theology and not rarely with the philosophy of religion. There is no future for a methodologically inconsistent and, in some cases, religiously militant and interested misrepresented academic of scientific interest. There is nothing interdisciplinary to the simple *gathering* of knowledge about religion, mere considerations, or theoretically-methodologically disarticulated approaches. It is not assertive nor does it contribute to its consolidation to trivialize the discipline as a mere disarticulated grouping of knowledge about religion.

Wondering what the discipline of Religion is may seem extemporaneous to us, although it is necessary. We should already have understood this very well. However, this is because our work still needs to be better discussed and our academic doing to don't be distorted by other properly religious approaches and interests.

Finally, I could not fail to consider the commitment of our discipline which, besides being basic science is also applied science. The contribution of research and theorization

processes to the deepening of the understanding of religious facts should not lose sight of the contribution of this science to the overcoming of numerous social challenges related to social, political and economic issues; questions related to inter-religious and intercultural dialogue; cultivation of a culture of respect for religious diversity; ethnic-racial and gender diversity; education and religion.