

# *Review and Response: Kocku von Stuckrad's Study on The Scientification of Religion*

with Leonardo Ambasciano, "(Pseudo)science, Religious Beliefs, and Historiography: Assessing The Scientification of Religion's Method and Theory"; and Kocku von Stuckrad, "The Hybridity of Scientific Knowledge: A Response to Leonardo Ambasciano."

## THE HYBRIDITY OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE: A RESPONSE TO LEONARDO AMBASCIANO

by Kocku von Stuckrad

*Abstract.* This article responds to Leonardo Ambasciano's review of *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* by Kocku von Stuckrad. It criticizes a narrative that presents naturalism and science as the ultimate system of knowledge. Contesting this rhetoric, the article underscores the plurality and hybridity of knowledge systems, which is the main topic of the book under review.

*Keywords:* discourse research; knowledge; naturalism; religion and science

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There are many systems of knowledge in European and North American cultural history that have interacted, and sometimes competed, with one another. All of these systems are hybrid, which means that their plausibility and their cultural acceptance are in constant flux, even though some of these systems present themselves as having privileged access to truth and reality. If we look at the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we can see the emergence of a knowledge system of "science" that has repercussions on both the "natural sciences" and the "humanities." Around 1900, cultural knowledge was established in new academic disciplines, from anthropology to religious studies, sociology, theoretical physics, biology, Indology, and so on. This professionalization of knowledge about nature, the human being, and other fields of cultural interest has led to a codification of what today is regarded as scientific and theoretically sound. In this process, the borders between accepted and nonaccepted knowledge have shifted (again). What

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[*Zygon*, vol. 51, no. 4 (December 2016)]

[www.zygonjournal.org](http://www.zygonjournal.org)

© 2016 The Authors. *Zygon*® published by Wiley Periodicals, Inc. on behalf of Institute on Religion in an Age of Science ISSN 0591-2385 1067  
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is more, academic theories have exerted a significant influence on public discourses, and it is this influence on and interaction with broader societal processes that I address as the “scientification of religion.”

If we want to understand the shifting meanings and demarcations that give “science” and “religion” their cultural location, we will have to look at the relationality of science and religion, rather than starting with a definition of the terms. It is in mutual relation that science and religion—just like many other concepts—receive their meaning (see also Vollmer and von Stuckrad 2016). From this perspective, we don’t care too much about what science and religion “really” are, and may even regard the attempt at finding an answer to that question futile. What we do care about is how societies communicate about these concepts, draw boundaries, and convey meaning to religion and science in relation to each other, and in relation to other concepts. Discourse research, particularly when it is informed by Michel Foucault and the sociology of knowledge, provides an excellent theoretical framework for our inquiry into the dynamics of construction, legitimization, contestation, organization, and material manifestation of knowledge in a given society. Clearly positioned in this theoretical framework, *The Scientification of Religion* (von Stuckrad 2014) attempts to find tentative answers to the question of how academic (secular) environments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have conveyed new meanings to religion, and how these meanings have resulted in new forms of religious practice. Academic authorities, scientists, and other experts form a discourse community with readers, practitioners, novelists, artists, politicians, and all the other actors partaking in the discourse under consideration. Again, the differentiation between expert knowledge and lay knowledge is a moving target that discourse research addresses in all its fluidity.

It is interesting to see that at the beginning of his review, Leonardo Ambasciano seems to “get” the main argument of *The Scientification of Religion*, but then he loses it completely. In much of his critique he reads things into my text that I would never say, or takes certain positions for granted that I in fact problematize in the book. Because these biases seem to be representative of a powerful discourse today, the following remarks are not just meant as a response to Ambasciano but as a comment on broader cultural debates as well.

It is noteworthy that Ambasciano presents the content of my analysis in a language that is completely absent from or even explicitly problematized in the book. For instance, nowhere in the book do I write about a “fringe, quasi-religious or crypto religious cult by some overzealous supporters who misinterpreted and/or distorted Darwin’s ideas” (Ambasciano 2016, 1064); it would also be hard to find evidence in the book that I address “the vicious cycle, or self-reinforcing loop, of scholars whose academic output fed into the creation of modern religious discourses and cult revivals” (Ambasciano 2016, 1064). Using this language to describe

the material I analyze in the book is a serious distortion of my argument. Ambasciano's text is actually a good example of discursive Othering and the drawing of lines between "religion" and things other than religion ("quasi-religious" "crypto religious," "cult"), between "true Darwinism" and its "distortions" (even by leading thinkers of Darwinism in Europe), and so on. This language is the *object* of my analysis, not its *instrument*.

This type of uncritical self-confidence that feels comfortable making strong judgments about systems of knowledge that differ from its reductionist definition of "true science" is problematic. The author's normative understanding of science seems to be the reason why he assumes that my book is a "plea for discrediting and questioning the credibility of science." It is not. The book is an analysis of science as a social phenomenon and as discursive practice, and it is an analysis of the shifting borders between what communities regard as valid knowledge about the world. I have no stakes in the question of what is the "true representation of reality," hence I don't talk about "heuristic value," as Ambasciano thinks I do. But I am indeed critical of the unreflected use of biased terms such as "pseudo-science." On page 61 of my book, I quote Roger Cooter's apt conclusion: "From the history of phrenology and other such pseudo-sciences, it is clear there is more to be lost than gained historically by seeking retrospectively to draw sharp distinctions between the 'real' and the 'pseudo' in science" (Cooter 2003, 684; see also von Stuckrad 2014, 56–62, 86–88).

Still, Ambasciano takes issue with the fact that I do not condemn "pseudo-science" as wrong and dangerous. He concludes that therefore I must be a caretaker of these "cults." Such a conclusion, though logically flawed, is unfortunately quite common (on astrology as a case in point, see von Stuckrad 2016). This rhetorical figure is the same one identified by Jeffrey J. Kripal as the basic problem that scholars have to face if they study phenomena that dominant discourse disregards as "paranormal" or "pseudo-science." One response, says Kripal, is "the ideological debunker (as opposed to the fair and open-minded skeptic), standard scientist, or conventional materialist who seeks to protect a flatland materialist worldview by simply *keeping off the table* all of the fantastic stuff that suggests that we are living in a super natural world that is anything but flat" (Strieber and Kripal 2016, 11, emphasis in original). Among the most common strategies employed in this discourse are "a naive understanding of mind that classifies all visionary phenomena as simple 'imaginary' products of brain matter (without the slightest clue how this works)" and "the public shaming of sincere and serious people, from all walks of life, who see or say otherwise" (Strieber and Kripal 2016, 11). There are certainly points of disagreement between Kripal's and my own historical and theoretical convictions, but when it comes to giving historical credit to knowledge systems that are ultimately incommensurable—which means that we can't prove or falsify the one with the instruments of the other—I agree with

him that it is evidence of bad scientific method to debunk alternative systems of knowledge without actually being able to falsify them. This is why I acknowledge the possibility (!) that Helena P. Blavatsky had mediumistic skills; in turn, the underlying discursive structure is probably why Ambasciano regards my neutral position as a “bizarre apologetic apogee” (Ambasciano 2016, 1065).

As a consequence, I don’t see how “new realism” would challenge discursive approaches to religion and science. Ambasciano’s bringing in “the indeconstructible [sic!] ontological basis of natural sciences” seems to me just a replication of old narratives about science’s privileged access to reality, and nothing that discourse research is really engaged with. What is discursively interesting, though, is the fact that naturalism and the narratives it reinforces have dominated many fields in the humanities recently, including the study of religion. This is in line with what Lisa Sideris calls “new cosmology”—including “epic science”—that “typically coalesces around a single story of evolution often touted as so complete or cutting-edge as to suggest that we are in the final frontier, closing in on the final cosmic mysteries. In its totalizing ambition, the new cosmology reaches, paradoxically, toward the eradication of wonder itself” (Sideris in *The Immanent Frame* 2015).

But the ontological discussion is relevant in a different way. As I have said repeatedly, discourse research and other constructionist approaches are about attributions of meaning to things, regardless of the ontological status of the things themselves (von Stuckrad 2014, 9; von Stuckrad 2016, 216–17). These approaches do not deny that there are things (and a world) before and after their discursivization; they only adopt a skeptical position *vis-à-vis* knowledge systems that claim a privileged access to the ultimate meaning of things. “New realism” therefore does not really challenge constructionist approaches; such a challenge comes from what has recently been introduced as “new materialism” (Coole and Frost 2010). The dependency of humans on things (Hodder 2012) limits the possibilities of the discursivization of things; nonhuman agents and objects become active parts of discourse communities in a way that classic discourse theory had not foreseen. This new focus on relationality provides intriguing opportunities to further develop discursive theories and question the implicit anthropocentrism that characterizes constructionist approaches (see von Stuckrad forthcoming).

I do hope these brief remarks help to clarify what *The Scientification of Religion* is (and is not) all about. I want to thank Leonardo Ambasciano for engaging with the book.

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