Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe (2012a, 2012b) characterize their paper as a reflective comment on their aspirations for the field of Religious Studies they have committed their careers to. As it turns out, these aspirations have been frustrated by developments in the field in recent decades. The main reason for this is the supposed influence of theological and religious agendas in Religious Studies. However, the authors go further than complaining. They argue that a scientific programme of Religious Studies "is not ever likely to occur" and that to entertain the hope for it "is to be in the grip of a false and unshakeable delusion" (p. 221).

To support this central thesis, the authors develop two lines of argument. The "historical argument" tries to show that the study of religion actually was a scientific enterprise in the nineteenth century, although it later became compromised by non-scientific agendas. The "scientific argument" relies on theories proposed by the Cognitive Science of Religion to explain why they believe that Religious Studies will never succeed in establishing a truly scientific programme. At the same time, and somewhat in contradiction, they recommend the cognitive sciences as the most promising means of developing a theoretically coherent scientific study of religion.

Before I comment on this paper I should make clear in the first place that I believe it is a polemic pamphlet aimed at provoking and criticizing but not at elaborating sophisticated arguments demanding detailed discussion. But as the editors of Religio: Revue pro religionistiku consider this provocative paper an opportunity to launch a debate on the disciplinary status of Religious Studies, I am happy to participate.

As things stand, Martin and Wiebe's paper is the point of reference. I shall therefore roughly follow its outline and first consider the historical argument brought forward to substantiate the thesis that Religious Studies are not a scientific discipline, nor are they ever likely to become one. Although I share many of their views, I disagree with the idea that religion is a subject sui generis and the Study of Religion is therefore substantially different from other scientific disciplines. The second point deals with
their “scientific argument,” which relies on insights from the cognitive sci-
ence of religion to support their thesis. Finally I will make some remarks
on the pitfall of ontological naturalism as theoretical approach to the
Study of Religion, which is about to substitute one ideological agenda in
Religious Studies by another.

Religious Studies as an Academic Discipline: Historical and
Institutional Aspects

The authors start with the observation that no undergraduate department
of Religious Studies has fully implemented a scientific programme of study and
research (p. 221). They explain the objective of scientific research as being “to
gain public (intersubjectively available) knowledge of public (intersubject-
ively available) facts” (p. 221). Given this explanation, it appears strange to
maintain that Religious Studies hitherto have not been engaged in a scientific
research programme. Unless we regard historical research as fiction writing,
we should think that it is dealing with intersubjectively available facts to gain
intersubjectively available knowledge. History of Religions has for decades
been a common designation for the discipline from which the Study of Religion
emerged, as can be seen from the name still being used by the International
Association for the History of Religions (IAHR). Historical studies are not a sci-
ence, but I would not agree that the history of religions generally has been or
is in the service of ideological, theological or religious agendas; and it is hard
to imagine that Luther Martin, whose works include many fine pieces of his-
torical and comparative studies, would consider the history of religions a futile
enterprise.

Their “historical argument” suggests that in the nineteenth century
there emerged a scientific programme to study religion, which has been
compromised by more recent developments (p. 223). Although their
view of the mythic ancestors of the discipline such as Friedrich Max Müller
may be idealized, I concede that much which nowadays runs under the
name of “Religious Studies” in North America includes teaching and
research with ideological, theological, religious and political agendas.
“Religious Studies” is not an academic discipline but a catch-all term for
dealing with religion in all kinds of academic fashion. Thus, part of the
problem is terminological. Religious Studies is not the heir of the academic
ancestors the authors refer to, but a conglomeration of—well—religious
studies. “Religionswissenschaft” to some extent is better off as a discipline,