Incapacitating Scholarship: Or, Why Methodological Agnosticism Is Impossible

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Abstract

In religious studies, many scholars prefer methodological agnosticism over methodological naturalism, as agnosticism apparently avoids ontological commitments that would offend religious practitioners; as such, it perhaps is more amenable to the often implicit goals of interfaith understanding or conciliation. However, this chapter will argue that methodological agnosticism, if it were taken seriously, would incapacitate not only critical scholarship but practically any form of scholarship. Most forms of critique are necessarily at odds with the claims of some informants, e.g., to say that gender is "socially constructed" or "performed" fundamentally contradicts the claims of many who would insist that gender differences are divinely inscribed on our bodies. Similarly, to say that archaeology suggests that the Exodus story is fictional or that the four gospels hold competing views is to contradict a wide variety of ontological claims about the divine inspiration of Christian scripture. In addition, even mere description incurs ontological commitments. Simply to describe Christianity as a cultural tradition that has changed over time is to commit oneself to the ontological view that it does not have an unchanging essence; to describe it as unchanging incurs essentialist ontological commitments; to suggest that there is no such thing as Christianity in itself, opting to restrict oneself to describing subjects who merely assert identity claims about "Christianity," would entail a third set of commitments. In sum, retreat to agnostic description is a logical impossibility. In conclusion I will suggest that methodological naturalism is the only remaining option that is both intellectually honest and admissible in a modern university context.

Keywords


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Methodological agnosticism as an approach to the study of religion attempts to bracket the truth claims of religious practitioners; this form of scholarship seeks to talk about practitioners while setting aside the question of whether those practitioners’ claims are true or false.¹ There are a number of reasons why such an approach might be considered appropriate. First, perhaps it’s presumed to be a more hermeneutically generous approach—and therefore perhaps less distorting and more ethical—compared to critical or naturalist approaches inherently suspicious of insiders’ claims or reductionist approaches that contradict emic views. Second, perhaps the claims of insiders are considered to be beyond falsification; on such a view, while we might be able to describe what practitioners say about the gods, perhaps there’s no way to investigate whether those gods actually exist. Third, perhaps we as scholars should remain open-minded rather than close-minded about the possibility of, e.g., supernatural or paranormal phenomena; perhaps, as Shakespeare famously put it, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Whatever the reason, those who approach their subject using methodological agnosticism claim to avoid forms of reductionism that assume a narrowly naturalist or materialist ontology. The claim of this chapter, however, is that methodological agnosticism is in most cases disingenuous, if not outright misleading or obfuscating. Even so-called mere descriptions often carry implicitly reductionist explanations and commit us to a view of how the world works that is frequently at odds with the claims of practitioners. Were we to adopt methodological agnosticism with any rigor, our hands as scholars would be tied and there would be very little we could actually say about our subject matter. Methodological agnosticism, if rigorously followed, would incapacitate scholarship.

1 Defending Methodological Agnosticism

While I have met many scholars who claim to be methodologically agnostic and have read books and articles that claim to approach religion agnostically, there is surprisingly little defense of this approach in our discipline’s literature. When I began researching this topic, I had a difficult time finding texts that explicitly discuss methodological agnosticism at length; typically I found only a

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