

Review

Luther H. Martin, *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 364 pp. ISBN 978-1-61451-619-4. €99.95/US\$140.00 hbk.

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Historian of science and biologist Frank J. Sulloway wrote once in his groundbreaking *Born to Rebel* (1998) that “Historians have tended to resist the use of scientific methods, generally on the grounds that they are ‘inappropriate’ to historical understanding.” Nowhere else in the Humanities has this ban been as powerful as it used to be in the history of religions (HoR henceforth). A tentative cultural evolutionary and proto-cognitive framework for the HoR had been suggested in the late nineteenth century, but widespread fideism and theo-teleological approaches took control of the discipline. Ultimately, and almost a century later, the postmodernist *pars destruens* contributed to expose the confessional commitment diffused in the HoR, unfortunately neglecting the *pars construens* and criticizing any scientific, rival approach. Only recently, has a renewed interest about evolutionary and cognitive sciences returned to the fore. The impression conveyed, though, is that the cognitive science of religion (henceforth CSR) and (at least a part of) the postmodernist toolbox irremediably exclude each other. *Tertium non datur*, or so it seems. The new book by Luther H. Martin, one of the founding members of both the *North American Association for the Study of Religion* (NAASR) and the *International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion* (IACSR), demonstrates otherwise.

Entitled *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion*, the volume is a collection of 24 essays ranging from 1994 to 2012 (with one previously unpublished article) which includes a partly autobiographical *Introduction* and a *Foreword* by Martin’s colleague and historian of religions William E. Paden. Following Martin’s *Introduction*, the many overlapping themes and arguments of the book could be tentatively organized into seven sections which document the meticulous application

of evolutionary biology and cognitive science combined with Foucaultian post-structuralism as a coherent and scientific alternative to the (crypto) theological perspectives still *en vogue*, while using Hellenistic cults and cultures as specific case studies to challenge disciplinary assumptions once taken for granted (e.g. “syncretism” or “individualism”).

The first section, dedicated to the *Academic Study of Religion*, offers a concise background of the socio-political agendas of the HoR after World War II and makes the case for a scientific and non-confessional, or secular, study of religion. As Martin unfailingly recalls, a scientific path to religious studies had already been proposed at the very inception of modern academia, but it was discarded later in favour of approaches that reified the “sacred” as a manifestation of an ahistorical “reality” or of a omnipotent “agent.” A keen interest in the theoretical and methodological issues concerning the history of religious studies leads Martin to the deconstruction of the ideological and extra-epistemic tenets behind hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches.

Comparison is the title of the second section, which criticizes the unrestrained “parallelomania” developed in the HoR (p. 95) while offering the basic elements for a “new comparativism” centred upon “biological patterns of behaviours” (p. 75) and upon the cognitive mechanisms that constrain human universals and shape their cross-cultural productions.

Michel Foucault’s acknowledgement of the overarching role of power and dominance in human sociality, and especially his “technology of the self” (i.e. the identitary construction as forced or limited by socio-political apparatuses), are engaged in the third part (*Social Scientific Theory and Hellenistic Religion*). In this section, Martin argues that the notion of “secret” in Greco-Roman religions should be considered as a socio-political manufacture primarily aimed not at defending some sort of metaphysical, hidden knowledge (which scholars ought, somehow, to reconstruct) but rather as a “rhetorical strategy of silence for structuring social relations” (p. 115) and standardizing socio-religious civic structures.

The following section (*Historiography and Scientific Theorizing*) deals more closely with evolutionary and cognitive frameworks, advocating an extension of the concept of kinship in ultrasocial ancient societies as “narratives of descent” (p. 97), i.e. kin recruitment fictively shaped by religious discourses prestigiously tied to mythical ancestors. The validity of the adaptationist approach in CSR (i.e. religion consists of adaptations selected for on the basis of their in-group advantage) is also questioned.

The fifth and sixth sections are specifically dedicated to the relationship between CSR and HoR, focusing on the classic category of “ritual”. Adopting Lawson and McCauley’s both ritual competence and ritual form

hypotheses, and Whitehouse's modes of religiosity theory, Martin is able to challenge the search for fixed doctrines in the study of Mithraism, hence renouncing "the futile quest of decoding mysteria" (p. 325). The previously unpublished paper hosted in this section builds upon Daniel Lord Smail's brilliant *On Deep History and the Brain* (2008) to provide an insightful account of how activities (e.g. rituals and performances), psychoactive substances and foods (or the lack thereof, i.e. fasting) interacted with memory and were manipulated or modulated during the rituals of late-antique mysteries in order to foster strong social bonds inside small groups. The neuroendocrinological dimension of deep history is thus combined with the social dimension of current frameworks in CSR (p. 258).

The *Conclusions* remark once more the critical approach favoured by Martin and take into consideration the dangers and potential distortions of a CSR inflected in (crypto)theological terms, while realistically noting that, inasmuch as human beings are constrained by a natural inclination towards religious thinking (as a result of a cognitive machinery that can be overridden only with conscious control), the possibilities for establishing once and for all a truly scientific and theo/teleological-free study of religions remain very low. Nonetheless, Martin's "cognition-based social-scientific model in historical research" (p. 273) appears as one of the most inspiring and viable ways to rethink historiographical methodology, reminding us all that the multilayered scientific study of religions and cultures, with their explicit/implicit relationships and negotiations of social power, need not exclude a judicious use of the post-structuralist toolbox.

Consequently, and despite its onerous price, *Deep History, Secular Theory* excels as a crucial asset in the emergent field of cognitive historiography and will undoubtedly help to firmly set the coordinates of a renovated scientific study of human culture/s and religion/s.

References

- Smail, D. L. 2008. *On Deep History and the Brain*. Los Angeles, Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Sulloway, F. J. 1998. *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*. London: Abacus.