

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Legitimizing Claims of Special Knowledge: Towards an Epistemic Turn in Religious Studies

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Robertson, David G. (2021). Legitimizing Claims of Special Knowledge: Towards an Epistemic Turn in Religious Studies. *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 57(1) pp. 17–34.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2021 David G. Robertson



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.33356/temenos.107773>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)



TEMENOS

NORDIC JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Temenos Vol. 57 No. 1 (2021), 17–34

DOI: 10.33356/temenos.107773

## Temenos Lecture 2020

# Legitimizing Claims of Special Knowledge: Towards an Epistemic Turn in Religious Studies

DAVID G. ROBERTSON

*The Open University, UK*

### Abstract

A significant function of the category ‘religion’ is demarcating and insulating particular claims of special knowledge – but too often, Religious Studies serves to mystify and defend this function, rather than critically analysing it. Drawing on categories in which claims of special knowledge are central, including Gnosticism, conspiracy theories, and esotericism, this paper will look at the history of Religious Studies scholars operating within epistemes which they should be critiquing. Yet a focus on multiple and overlapping knowledges, and competition over epistemic capital, suggests a possible future for the social-scientific study of religion.

*Keywords: social epistemology, Gnosticism, conspiracy theories, knowledge, decolonialization*

My first conference paper, while I was still a PhD candidate, was given at the 2011 BASR conference in Durham, UK. It looked at UFOs in New Age conspiracy theories – a very basic version of what would eventually evolve into my doctoral thesis, and then first book, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (2016). As has almost always been the case, the paper was part of an ‘odds and ends’ session made up of papers that didn’t fit into any of the themed panels. Towards the end of my presentation, I made a comment to the effect that, despite how widespread these ideas are, and how long they have been around, this material was still not being taken seriously by scholars. Here, the chair – a senior scholar whom I will not name – interjected, ‘That’s because these people are crazy!’

This was an impromptu humorous remark, of course, rather than a considered scholarly opinion. Nevertheless, I was struck that the comment appeared during my paper in particular, rather than during papers on Spiritualism, Candomblé, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Pagan healing rituals, Egyptian funerary magic, or indigenous worldviews in which animals, rocks, and invisible persons might be regarded as persons. I will be forever grateful that I had the wherewithal in the moment to respond with a riff on *epoché*: 'I don't evaluate truth claims – I'm a Religious Studies scholar!' But thinking it over later, I realized that this taken-for-granted methodological maxim might not be entirely correct. Religious Studies scholars do not always bracket off truth claims impartially or equally. In fact, Religious Studies – despite its self-identification as entirely social-scientific and non-confessional – mystifies and even defends *certain* claims to special knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

It is not very controversial to point out that Religious Studies is, as Paul-François Tremlett puts it, 'a field of enquiry that lacks any clear or singular definition of its object or a specific procedure, method or set of assumptions by which [it] might claim for itself the (dubious) status of a "discipline"' (2008, vi-ii). The issue is often presented in definitional terms – do we approach 'religion' functionally, as beliefs and behaviours which serve particular purposes for individuals and/or societies, or substantively, as a particular *sui generis* thing-in-itself, irreducible to any other mode of analysis? This apparently simple definitional division obscures an epistemological gulf, however, because substantive definitions frequently posit non-naturalistic explanations, and special knowledge based on accessing them.

Alternatively, we might take Religious Studies as indicating non-confessional approaches to the study of religion – that is, the study of religion without making claims that run contrary to the scientific, naturalist episteme of the modern academy – with theology indicating confessional approaches. But Religious Studies as a discipline is deeply invested in authorizing claims to special knowledge, and in mystifying the processes of this authorization. In fact, all attempts to present 'religion' as a cross-cultural category of analysis ultimately relies on theological distinctions (Fitzgerald 1997). More than this, Religious Studies is the caretaker of the category 'religion', which itself serves as an ideological tool by which certain types of special knowledge are authorized, and certain others stigmatized.

---

1 Or studies in religion, *Religionswissenschaft*, and other variants. I will stick with Religious Studies here for simplicity, while making no normative distinction between them.

This conclusion emerged from the two major research projects I completed over the last ten years. My doctoral research focused on the social function of conspiracy theories, and particularly the role of different forms of stigmatized knowledge. It presented conspiracists as a *counter-elite*, where ‘the liberation of the oppressed is constructed as being realized through a revolution in knowledge, a seizing not of the means of production but of the *means of cognition*’ (2006, 207). The second, *Gnosticism and the History of Religions* (2021), similarly concerns elite claims of special knowledge, though this time focusing on scholars of religion. In this paper I will explore the similarities and differences between these two examples of how special knowledge is claimed and legitimized, and what it shows about the economy of knowledge in which we academics are stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it will show how Religious Studies, and the social sciences more broadly, work to differentiate and defend ‘religion’ against other forms of merely ‘irrational belief’. In elevating certain kinds of special knowledge, and demonizing others, these categories are revealed as gatekeepers in what Timothy Fitzgerald has called the discourse on civility and barbarity (2007). Although he was writing about religion, his remarks apply to conspiracy theories just as well:

far from being a kind of thing or an objective and observable domain around which an industry of scholarship can flourish, religion is a modern invention which authorises and naturalises a form of Euro-American secular rationality. In turn, this supposed position of secular rationality constructs and authorises its ‘other’, religion and religions (Fitzgerald 2007, 6)

In concluding, I will suggest a way forward—an ‘epistemic turn’ in the study of religion, which makes claims of special knowledge explicit and indeed central to our analysis. As well as potentially helping to address the methodological issues of Religious Studies, it might also help to decolonize an inherently colonial category.

---

<sup>2</sup> This paper forms a diptych with ‘Analytic categories and claims of special knowledge’ (forthcoming in *Religion and Society*). While the case studies and mode of analysis are the same, the latter focuses on issues of special knowledge in boundary maintenance and the resulting confusion over first- and second-order categories. They represent my thinking at the end of this formative stage of my development as I begin to sketch out some new areas of research.

### Poor person's cognitive mapping

Like 'religion', 'conspiracy theory' is a loaded category. There have undoubtedly been many conspiracies in political history, at least as far back as the Roman Republic. Some were correct; others were not. At certain times, theories about conspiracies which turned out to be incorrect have been an accepted and public part of political discourse; for example, a Jewish or Masonic plot behind the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, Senator McCarthy's Red Scare in the 1950s, or the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare of the 1990s. None of these were referred to as a conspiracy theory at the time, however. There must be something more to the category than simply 'a theory that (incorrectly) posits a conspiracy'.

Most often, this difference is presented as a deficit of thinking. The association of conspiracy theories with paranoia largely derives from Richard Hofstadter's famous 1964 article, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, although it should be noted that Hofstadter didn't mean paranoia in the clinical sense. Rather, he was referring to a rhetorical style based on a polarized Manichaeic worldview and an entrenched ideological position. In the wake of McCarthyism there was a move towards a less divisive consensus politics, and conspiracy theories were portrayed as counter to this aim, being instead totalizing, antagonistic, and capable of mobilizing minority groups. Hofstadter then used conspiracy theory to construct a new, unified United States identity in the context of the Cold War, but the connection with mental illness has persisted. There have been a number of attempts by psychologists to quantify belief in conspiracy theories according to a 'Conspiracy Mentality scale' (Bruder *et al*, 2014), or to relate it to schizotypal tendencies or 'cognitive illusions' (Kruglanski, 1987), but there are significant issues with these approaches. Like all quantitative research, there are issues about how, in reducing the field to binary questions, such data can reflect the concerns of those doing the study. Moreover, their data set typically includes a number of patently implausible examples of conspiracy theories, but does not deal with either those that are accepted and promoted by power brokers (e.g. McCarthyism, Satanic Ritual Abuse, etc.) nor those that later turned out to be true (Tuskegee, Iran-Contra, P2 scandal, etc.), nor other beliefs that do not stand up to scientific reason but are never stigmatized (religion, for example). If we start with the assumption that conspiracism is necessarily paranoid and/or incorrect, then base a survey on that assumption, the results of that survey cannot help but reinforce our initial assumptions.

The idea that conspiracy theories are necessarily irrational is similarly difficult to sustain under scrutiny. Despite Frederic Jameson's oft-quoted aside

that conspiracy theories are the ‘poor person’s cognitive mapping’ (1990, 356), it is by no means clear that there is any systemic flaw in conspiracist reasoning that renders it *a priori* unjustified.<sup>3</sup> For example, it is often claimed that conspiracy theories are non-falsifiable; yet, as Brian Keeley points out, falsifiability is a poor criterion in the social sciences where actors may be concealing their motivations, deliberately or unconsciously, wholly or in part. Moreover, while it is certainly true that many conspiracy theories do not stand up to scientific standards of proof, they are by no means unique in that respect—neither do human rights, political ideologies, support for football teams, love, or identification with different national identities, yet these are deeply held by actors and profoundly affect human behaviour as much as scientific materialism, if not more so. Indeed – and as shown by the aforementioned psychological studies, to give them their due – conspiracy beliefs are not marginal, nor gendered, nor uniquely modern or Western. The category may be new, but the ideas to which it refers are not. Yet that there is today a perceived *need* for such a category, however, may be significant in itself.

Perhaps it is as important to consider what is *not* held subject to these analyses, and scrutinized for motivated reasoning, lack of falsifiability, entrenched ideology, and so on. For this discussion, we need to question why religious beliefs are not included. There is nothing *a priori* less rational in the claim that reptilian extraterrestrials run the political system than the claim that Satan and his minions do. Indeed, as Brian Keeley has noted, Christian beliefs that a hidden being is manipulating events according to a plan that they won’t reveal sounds a lot like a conspiracy theory to outsiders, with evidence that points to the non-existence of said agents inverted to become evidence of the agents deliberately concealing their actions (Keeley 2007, 148). So, while it may be true that many conspiracy theories exhibit flaws of reasoning, they are far from unique in this. Flawed reasoning is simply a feature of human thought, from conspiracy theories to religions to political positions and beyond.

As Dyrendal and Asprem have argued, in both conspiracy theories and esoteric religions, history is conceptualized as a struggle between the majority and those in possession of an elite, transformative knowledge (2018). It is for this reason that we find gnosis so frequently appealed to in scholarship in Western esotericism too, by scholars including Wouter Hanegraaff, Roelef van den Broek, Arthur Versluis, and others. Indeed, there is a direct line between these scholars and the Eranos group through Henri Corbin and Gilles

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Dentith (ed., 2018) and themed issue 4(2) of *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* (2007).

Quispel (Robertson 2021, 122–36). Before we turn to gnosis and Eranos, however, I want to underline the point I have been making – conspiracy theory, as a category, is about epistemic power. A conspiracy theory is that which we are not permitted to think. The religious examples are familiar parts of the hegemonic episteme, and as such, they are ideas you are permitted to think. Indeed, in most modern states the right to hold such irrational beliefs is protected by law, even unto the right to break certain laws that apply to others. That we have internalized that these ideas deserve such protections but that other equally irrational ideas deserve ridicule, censorship or legal penalties is, of course, exactly how hegemony (in Gramsci’s understanding) works – and scholars are not immune. Latour writes:

What’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized... version of social critique...? In both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always constantly, continuously, relentlessly... I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation (2004, 229–30).

Conspiracy theories – and the Post Truth condition of which they are an expression (Fuller 2020, 117) – are a democratization of knowledge, and as such they are a direct challenge to the epistemic hegemony of the academy. And this is why we are so troubled by them.

### **So-called knowledge**

Elsewhere, however, the academy is happy to protect and mystify other forms of irrational, non-falsifiable knowledge. The study of religion is a case in point, but while theology is explicit in its relationship to the metaphysical, Religious Studies presents itself as secular, non-confessional, and social-scientific, so it is perhaps surprising to find the same processes at work. This is clear in many of the categories which Religious Studies has inherited from the phenomenological History of Religions school – shamanism, esotericism, and perhaps most clearly, Gnosticism. In the work of Roelef van den Broek, April DeConick, Jeffery Kripal, and others, Gnosticism continues to be presented as heretical, transformative, salvific knowledge. Not only do they use the first-order term Gnosis as if it were a second-order tool of analysis, but Gnosticism has come to indicate that Religious Studies scholars are not mere social scientists, but the guardians of special knowledge.

I cannot do full justice to an archaeology of the category ‘Gnosticism’ in the space I have here,<sup>4</sup> but the broad sweep is as follows. The catalogue of groups assembled by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century CE was concerned only with identifying heresy at a time when Christians were beginning to institutionalize. Although better known by the title of a later Latin translation, *Adversus Haereses*, the ‘Unmasking and Overthrow of So-Called Knowledge’ is not concerned simply with something called ‘gnosis’, but simply ‘knowledge’, as Osborn’s translation without later theological accretions makes clear (2004, 2–7). More importantly, it is not knowledge per se that is the issue – in fact, gnosis was widely used by Christian writers, including within the New Testament – but rather ‘so-called’ knowledge. In other words, it is not gnosis, but illegitimate gnosis that is the problem – Irenaeus is essentially labelling certain teachings as ‘fake news’. Note too that for Irenaeus, gnosis is not a special or unique *type* of knowledge in its own right, as it will later come to be understood.

Following the ascendancy of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, theologians who were very interested in separating Christian Truth from the mythology of the Bible rediscovered Gnosticism. At first it appears as a polemic against Catholicism – indeed, in the first printed use of the term in 1669, Henry More refers to Catholicism as ‘a spice of the old abhorred Gnosticism’ because of its idolatry and false prophecy (1669, preface). But around the turn of the eighteenth century the script flips, and Protestant theologians, including Ferdinand Baur and Adolf von Harnack, begin to present Gnosticism in a more positive light, as an original, unadulterated Christianity that could be separated from later Catholic accretions. Gnosticism as heresy was transformed into Gnosticism as proto-Protestantism – a move that was highly influential on nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship.

Around this time we also see Gnosticism beginning to be used as a self-identifier. Several gnostic churches appeared in France in the latter nineteenth century, where there was a lively market for independent churches, especially those with connections to local heresies like the Templars and the Cathars. In Germany interest was more literary, with gnostic-themed novels by Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse widely read. In the UK Gnosticism was closely connected to Theosophy. Blavatsky’s knowledge of it was drawn from Charles William King’s *The Gnostics and their Remains*, which presented Gnosticism as a link between Vedic and Christian teachings. For

---

4 My forthcoming monograph *Gnosticism and the History of Religions* (2021) is an attempt to do so.



King Gnosticism could be ‘traced up to Indian speculative philosophy, as its genuine fountain-head’ (1887, vi), and survived in Freemasonry, the Rosicrucians, and the Knights Templar. As Theosophy under Blavatsky was primarily constructed from Vedic and ‘occult’ sources, this narrative provided her with a way to link Indian philosophy historically to nineteenth-century esotericism. Blavatsky presented the Gnostics as the forerunners of the Theosophical society and indeed the entirety of the nineteenth-century ‘occult revival’:

But if the Gnostics were destroyed, the Gnosis, based on the secret science of sciences, still lives... the Gnosis or traditional secret knowledge, was never without its representatives in any age or country (1887, 163).

Although Blavatsky was strongly opposed to Christianity, arguing that the Gnostics were suppressed – ‘destroyed’ – allowed her to separate their Christianity from the institutions of her day. As well as giving succour to the many Theosophists who wanted to reconcile Theosophy and Christianity, this helped to give Theosophy historical legitimacy. For my argument, however, the most important outcome was the popularizing of a separation between a group called the Gnostics, and gnosis, a supposed category of secret, special knowledge.

Later, Blavatsky’s construction of Gnosticism played an important role in how Carl Jung reconciled his psychological and spiritual projects. Jung’s doctoral thesis drew from popular books on Gnosticism written by Blavatsky’s assistant, G.R.S. Mead. Jung saw the Gnostics as the counterparts of his contemporary analytic patients, seeking to overcome their sense of alienation from their unconscious selves. Gnosticism became more central to his thinking following his visionary breakdown or ‘creative illness’ in 1913, and when he became interested in alchemy, he began to think of it as historically connecting Gnosticism to analytical psychology. The gnostics, he claimed, were ‘the first thinkers to concern themselves (after their fashion) with the contents of the collective unconscious’ ([1958] 1969, 60).

From 1933 until his death in 1961 Jung was deeply involved in the annual Eranos meetings in Ascona, Switzerland. The participants included many notable scholars who were active in the development of the History of Religions school and the establishing of the IAHR in 1950, and also many who wrote about Gnosticism, including Henry Corbin, Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, Henri-Charles Puech, and Gilles Quispel. Quispel was profoundly influenced by Jung’s model of Gnosticism – though a fierce

defender of Gnosticism having a Jewish origin, Quispel Gnosticism was a perennial and universal tradition in its own right, a third epistemological 'component' of European culture distinct from both 'faith' and 'reason'. This tripartite epistemological model was later a central component of Wouter Hanegraaff's influential *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996).

In *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (1951) Quispel argued that Gnosticism began in Alexandria and spread throughout the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity, to become a proto-World Religion independent of, and predating, Christianity. This historical account is underpinned by an essentialist narrative of which this Weltreligion was but one expression. For the Eranos participants Gnosticism was essentially esotericism – the search for a secret, universal Truth fundamental to all religions. Indeed, the Eranos circle were often described as Gnostics, by themselves as well as by their critics. In Steven Wasserstrom's words,

Their form of 'pure' religiosity... ironically expressed an ambivalent attitude to the monotheistic message. They rejected the Masters of Suspicion, especially Marx, Freud, and Durkheim. Yet they themselves remained positioned in their own ironic posture, implying as they did a religious authority, but one esoterically occultated out of reach of ordinary believers (1999, 234).

The Eranos scholars saw themselves as the paragon of *Homo Religiosus*, with a firm stress on individual experience and a tendency to posit mysticism and esotericism as the pinnacle of religiosity. Their Gnosticism, then, was elite knowledge in both senses. A unique and irreducible special knowledge reached through transformative experience, Gnosticism was presented as *sui generis* religion *par excellence*. Which is why it was so tied to the development of the History of Religions school, and indeed, continues to be so.

A similar construction was being developed at the same time by Hans Jonas, a student of Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger. Demythologizing Mandaeen texts, Hermetica, and New Testament apocrypha through existential analysis, Jonas found that the essence of Gnosticism was a sort of spiritual existentialism. In *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist* (1935), and later in accessible English in *The Gnostic Religion* (1958), Jonas presented Gnosticism as an ahistorical existential religious current which survived by adapting itself to fit other traditions. Though Jonas was a philosopher, more interested in ethics than in religion, his existentialist construction was incorporated, along with Jung's, into the definitions presented as part of the IAHR's 1966 Messina Congress.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in the Egyptian desert in 1945 showed that these understandings of Gnosticism were completely at odds with the primary sources. They transformed how scholars understood the category, although it took until the 1970s for the texts to be widely available to scholars and the public. What they showed, as Michael Williams famously argued in *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* in 1996, was that no such religion ever existed historically, and the groups considered Gnostic by Irenaeus and the scholars who drew from his data set had no single thing in common other than that they were considered heretical in those formative days of Christianity.

A quarter of a century after Williams' critique this position is the norm in Biblical Studies, although it is not without its challengers. Among scholars in Religious Studies, however, it retains its currency. In the writings of April DeConick,<sup>5</sup> Jeffery Kripal, Roelef van den Broek, and many others Gnosticism continue to be presented as heretical, experiential, salvific, and transformative. In most cases this is done by separating Gnosticism (a historically-bounded religious tradition) from gnosis (an ahistorical religious type or essence) – a strategy which found its way into the History of Religions through Jung and Hans Jonas, and was codified at the Messina Congress. For some scholars today Gnosticism has come to indicate a new Great Heresy – that scholars of religion should indeed make appeals to special knowledge. In the work of Jeffery Kripal, for example, Gnosticism is presented not only as a matter of self-transformation, but as a revolution in the academic study of religion – albeit one which looks a lot like a return to the phenomenological essentialism of the History of Religions school.

Kripal's work since *The Serpent's Gift* (2006) has increasingly vocally critiqued the epistemic strictures of the academy, and of science. He seeks instead a 'gnostic methodology' (2006, 175) in which scholars 'do not so much "interpret" religious "data" as they unite with sacred realities' (2017, 104). Drawing from Eranos scholars, including Quispel, Gershom Scholem, and Mircea Eliade, he describes this approach as 'academic Gnosticism' (2017, 114). As Hanegraaff puts it, 'Kripal's "gnostic study of religion" is not so much a methodology for studying religion(s), but rather a religious and normative (meta)discourse about the nature of religion' (2008, 269).

---

<sup>5</sup> DeConick is primarily a biblical scholar, but her more recent work has moved into a more comparative framework with a focus on contemporary alternative religions, so I think it is fair to count this later work as having moved beyond Biblical Studies, at least for the sake of argument here.

Why does Kripal use the term 'Gnosticism' for this approach? I think the answer is in his quotation from Victoria Nelson's *The Secret Life of Puppets*:

'The greatest taboo among serious intellectuals of the century just behind us,' she writes, 'proved to be none of the "transgressions" itemized by postmodern thinkers: it was, rather, the heresy of challenging a materialist worldview' (Kripal 2017, 131).

This challenge to naturalism, and return to an enchanted scholarship, is so great a heresy that it has become equated with the archetypical heresy, Gnosticism itself.

### **Towards an epistemic turn in Religious Studies**

The scholars of the History of Religions were drawn to Gnosticism because they found in it a kind of experiential elite knowledge common to various esotericisms, and perhaps all 'authentic' religion – a Third Pillar, neither faith nor reason, but somehow transcending them both. As such, it represents a tradition of scholarship which is committed to a *sui generis* religious experience, while at the same time critical of religious institutions. These scholars see themselves as both scholars of religion and religious scholars, and as such see no conflict in mystifying or openly defending claims of special knowledge in Religious Studies.

On the other hand, the category 'conspiracy theories' seeks to defend (or construct) an inviolable colonial 'rationality' against (some) claims of special knowledge. It lionizes the scientific materialist position by portraying conspiracy theories as primitive, while ignoring other equally 'irrational' claims of special knowledge – specifically, religious – which are defended by institutions implicated in the existing power structures. Conspiracy theories were beyond the pale for scholars of religion in 2011 when I presented at the BASR, and I have the peer reviews to prove it. Thanks to the work of scholars like Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Asprem, Stef Aupers, myself, and others, this has changed considerably in the intervening decade, although political events have certainly helped.

The implications for the study of religion more broadly are only beginning to be accepted, however. It is incumbent upon the social sciences, and especially scholars of religion, to address how we are implicated in perpetuating this colonial episteme by defending certain claims of special knowledge and demonizing others. If we challenge some claims, some

beliefs, but not others, in whose interest are we acting? Despite our supposed expertise in 'bracketing off' the legitimation of the truth claims of those we study, this paper has argued that in fact this is something that is not universally applied. Indeed, in the case of conspiracy theories scholars seem happy to mock their irrationality, and motivations, in ways we do not often see in the case of those things we deem to be religions – perhaps because then we might be at risk of undermining the episteme from which our authority derives. The parallels with how Victorian anthropologists viewed 'primitives' is striking.

How do we deal with the claims of special knowledge which so many put as being at the core of the category? A potential answer might be to make these claims of special knowledge central to our analysis. In other words, such claims of special knowledge would no longer be something we seek to legitimize or mystify, but rather we could make these claims (whether by practitioners or scholars) the focus of our study. This could potentially free us of the framework inherited from Christianity and colonialism, without losing a distinct object of enquiry and the unique insights afforded by scholars trained in the study of religion specifically. As such, this would see Religious Studies moving to an approach influenced by social epistemology (Fuller 2002) or the sociology of knowledge (McCarthy 1996). These differ from philosophical epistemology in that they are collective rather than individual, and differ from the philosophy of science in not being concerned with the justification (or lack thereof) of particular forms of knowledge. Rather, the concern is with how knowledge claims are mobilized in the particular episteme of different groups, societies, and cultures. The unique contribution of Religious Studies would be to incorporate claims of special knowledge.

To do so, we might usefully adopt a little-noted aspect of Bourdieu's field theory of social capital – epistemic capital. For Bourdieu, the two principal currencies for the distribution of power are economic capital – wealth, what you own – and symbolic (or cultural) capital – what you know, including skills and use of language.<sup>6</sup> Each of these, in different ways, provides advantages in how easily one might influence other agents in the field to work towards particular ends. Epistemic capital, on the other hand, does not map *what* you know, but *how* you know. As defined by Karl Maton, epistemic capital is 'the way in which actors within the intellectual field engage in strategies aimed at maximizing not merely resources and status but also epistemic profits, that is, better knowledge of the world' (2003, 62). When

---

6 Most of the dubious forms of capital which are used in Religious Studies, such as spiritual capital, are actually forms of symbolic capital.

an agent cites research, invokes their 'lived experience', or claims that God told them, they are mobilizing particular forms of epistemic capital in order to influence others, and thereby gain an advantage within the field.

The dominant forms of epistemic capital in the contemporary world are scientific, tradition, experience, channelled, and synthetic knowledge. Scientific knowledge became, from the eighteenth century, the most prominent form of epistemic capital in European culture and its colonies, even though in practice tradition and channelled knowledge remained as powerful. Scientific knowledge is collective and relies upon the criterion of reproducibility, although as Kuhn, Latour, and others have shown, the boundaries of scientific knowledge are less clear-cut than is generally acknowledged. Tradition is essentially 'people like us do things like this', and like science, it is collective, and can be found both in institutional (top-down) forms and looser social groups (bottom-up). Experience, as Olav Hammer has noted, has become an increasingly important form of epistemic capital since the latter half of the twentieth century (2001, 339). It is individual (though of course that individual has a socially-constructed habitus, and the contents and interpretation of the experience is shaped by broader discourses), and its criterion is an emotional response of 'truthiness' – one *feels* that it is true, often with a hand laid on one's heart. Channelled knowledge differs from experience in that it comes from an external source, be it a vague Higher Power or Intelligence, a specific supernatural agency such as a god, angel, or demon, or from extraterrestrials. Its truth criterion rests in its claimed 'miraculous' nature, most commonly that it foretells the future. This is the source of charisma in Weber's famous model – 'exceptional powers or qualities... not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader' (1964, 328). This would also allow us to integrate Weber's model into a critical framework, without recourse to the essentialist, *sui generis* implications of charisma. Finally, synthetic knowledge links numerous smaller pieces of data across time, space, and context (and sometimes incompatible forms of epistemic capital) to create a 'bigger picture'. This practice of 'dot-connecting' creates highly suggestive narratives in the linkages, the blurring of the specific details, and the mystification of the selection process. While it is often presented as typical of conspiratorial thinking, it is far more widespread than this, and indeed was widely employed by scholars of religion including James Frazer, Carl Jung, and Mircea Eliade.

Which particular strategies are deemed acceptable is contingent on the particular field in which the discourse takes place. The specific configura-

tions are historically and socially contingent, tied to regimes of power. Drawing from Foucault, I refer to these specific configurations of epistemic capital as an *episteme* (1966 [1970], xxii), though von Stuckrad's description, 'power-knowledge systems', is also helpful (2010, 159). However, strategies are not exclusive to particular discourses, nor are fields usually defined by recourse to a single, specific form of epistemic capital. Take, as a pertinent example, a powerful religious institution such as the Catholic Church – here, both channelled knowledge and tradition are taken as paramount over other forms, though experience will also be important, and science is by no means stigmatized. Other religions may be similar, but not identical; evangelical churches will put a comparatively higher stress on channelling and experience than tradition, and New Age networks may put even less stress on tradition. And of course, each of these is set within a broader sociopolitical discourse in which science and tradition are presented as authoritative, with other claims controlled either through domestication via religious institutions and legal protections for 'faith' communities, or stigmatization via categories such as 'conspiracy theories'.

### Conclusion

Such an epistemic turn offers a number of opportunities. Focusing on how knowledge is claimed and justified could potentially help to bridge the gap between the social and the individual, between belief and practices, and potentially between scientific and social-scientific research into religion. Indeed, the distinction between 'belief' and 'knowledge' as scholarly categories – inherited from colonial anthropology – disappears. 'Belief' presently functions as a marker of 'irrational' and 'illegitimate' knowledge (with 'faith' functioning as domesticated 'irrational' knowledge) and carries the implication of 'primitive'. Rather than using these categories as natural, settled, and universal, Religious Studies might instead turn to how the boundaries of these different forms of knowledge are maintained in different systems.

From this position the differences between terms like culture, nation, religion, ideology become less important or disappear altogether, revealed instead to be mystified hierarchies of knowledge. As such, the epistemological turn would fit well with the move towards a 'religion and worldviews' Religious Education curriculum currently being mobilized in the UK. We would no longer need to justify how we include Humanism or Confucianism or New Age or Roman festivals or capitalism or UFOs within the category 'religion'. All epistemes would be equally available for analysis.

The way that categories like Gnosticism and conspiracy theories operate as gatekeepers of knowledge show how the critical deconstruction of our own categories is vital to the decolonization of contemporary academia. While 'making space around the table' for marginalized groups is indeed important, this by itself is not enough – it is the table itself that is the problem. Allowing for a proliferation of claims of special knowledge will only go so far to decolonize the discipline – especially because which marginalized claims are permitted is still subject to colonial ideas about religion – unless we simultaneously develop a new awareness of how such claims operate, in society at large, and within our own discipline. Indeed, the deconstruction of both 'religion' as a category and Religious Studies itself as a gatekeeper for special knowledge must take place before we can hope to affect the broader colonial episteme. Claims of special knowledge are at the heart of problems with contemporary religious studies – but this paper has suggested that they may also offer a potential way forward.

\* \* \*

DAVID G. ROBERTSON is lecturer of Religious Studies at Open University, United Kingdom. E-mail: david.robertson@open.ac.uk



*Bibliography***Asprem, Egil & Dyrendal, Asbjørn**

2018 Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories. – Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds), *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, 207–33. Brill: Leiden.

**Blavatsky, Helena P.**

1877 *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. Vol 1. New York: J. W. Bouton.

**Bruder, Martin & Peter Haffke & Nick Neave & Nina Nouripanah & Roland Imhoff**

2013 Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. – *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, 225. <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225>>

**Commission on RE**

2019 Final Report: Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE. – <<https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-Exec-Summary-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>>, accessed April 22, 2021.

**Dentith, Matthew R. X. (ed.)**

2018 *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

**Fitzgerald, Timothy**

1997 A critique of ‘religion’ as a cross-cultural category. – *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9 (2), 91–110.

2007 *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Foucault, Michel**

1966 [1970] *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock.

**Fuller, Steve**

2002 *Social epistemology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

2020 *A Player’s Guide to the Post-Truth Condition: The Name of the Game*. London: Anthem Press.

**Hammer, Olav**

2001 *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden: Brill.

**Hanegraaff, Wouter J.**

- 2008 Leaving the Garden (in Search of Religion): Jeffrey J. Kripal's Vision of a Gnostic Study of Religion. – *Religion* 38, 259–76.  
 1996 *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill

**Jameson, Fredric**

- 1990 Cognitive Mapping. – Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 347–60. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

**Jonas, Hans**

- 1934 *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist. 1. Die Mythologische Gnosis*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.  
 1958 [1963] *The Gnostic Religion*. 2nd rev. ed. Boston: Beacon.

**Jung, Carl Gustav**

- 1958 [1969] Psychology and Religion: West and East. – *Collected Works, Vol II*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**King, Charles William**

- 1887 *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, 2nd rev. ed. London: D. Nutt.

**Keeley, Brian. L.**

- 2007 God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory. – *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4 (2), 135–49.

**Kripal, Jeffrey J.**

- 2006 *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
 2017 *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

**Kruglanski, Arie W.**

- 1987 Blame-placing Schemata and Attribution Research. – In Graumann, C. F. and Moscovici, S. (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, 219–229. New York: Springer, Verlag.

**Latour, Bruno**

- 2004 Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. – *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2), 225–48.

**McCarthy, Ethan Doyle**

- 1996 *Knowledge as Culture: The New Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

**Maton, Karl**

- 2003 Pierre Bourdieu and the Epistemic Conditions of Social Scientific Knowledge. – *Space & Culture* 6 (1), 52–65

**More, Henry**

1669 *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles to the Seven Churches Together with a Brief Discourse of Idolatry, with Application to the Church of Rome.* London: James Flesher.

**Osborn, Eric**

2004 *Irenaeus of Lyons.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Quispel, Gilles**

1951. *Gnosis als Weltreligion.* Zurich: Origo Verlag.

**Robertson, David G.**

2016 *Conspiracy Theories, UFOs and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism.* London: Bloomsbury.

2021 *Gnosticism and the History of Religions.* London Bloomsbury.

**Stuckrad, Kocku von**

2010 Reflections on the Limits of Reflection: An Invitation to the Discursive Study of Religion. – *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2), 156–69.

**Tremlett, Paul-François**

2008 *Levi-Strauss on Religion: The Structuring Mind.* London: Equinox.

**Wasserstrom, Steven M.**

1999 *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Weber, Max**

1964 *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation.* A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (trans.). New York: Free Press.