

# Towards a Symmetrical Approach: The Study of Religions After Postmodern and Postcolonial Criticism

29 November – 1 December 2012 • Brno • Czech Republic

## Call for papers

David Bloor formulated the **principle of symmetry** in the sociology of knowledge very simply: “The symmetry postulate (...) enjoins us **to seek the same kind of causes for both true and false, rational and irrational beliefs.**” This formulation has far reaching consequences. With such an approach, the study of scientific knowledge can be conducted in the same manner as the study of the knowledge practices of “ordinary” people in everyday situations, including the variety of practices called “religion”. In this case, the study of ordinary practices as well as the study of scientific knowledge changes radically; the “Great Divide” (Bruno Latour), which makes them completely incommensurable, vanishes; they appear side by side, all open to the same kinds of questions and open-ended research into their complex relations, all treated with the same respect. “Anthropology comes home from the tropics,” as Bruno Latour put it. Another consequence is that “there is no privilege (...). [Symmetry] erodes distinctions that are said to be given in the nature of things, and instead asks how it is that they got to be that way” (John Law).

The principle of symmetry also gives a new meaning to *reflexivity* in social scientific study. Reflexivity within this approach does not mean the ponderings of the scientist on his own thoughts and thought processes. It refers rather to our ability to **reflect on our own scientific practices in the same empirical way as we reflect on the practices of the people we study** (Zdeněk Konopásek). We can study ourselves together with the people whose practices we try to understand and interpret. There is no second order knowledge that would be pure reflection. We are a part of the world we study and our activities change that same world (Anthony Giddens). We are part of our field.

It is thus clear that a/symmetry points to issues surrounding **the power of the scientific ordering of reality** as well as to the problems of dominance. Within this framework, adopting a symmetrical approach does not mean being exactly values-free or dispassionate. It “invariably subverts the dominant view and strengthens the side of the weak and the marginal (...). [It is a] way of siding with the oppressed” (Dick Pells). Knowledge cannot be impartial; nevertheless, with the symmetrical approach, one seeks to include the weaker voices that would otherwise be easily overheard. An endeavour to enact the symmetrical approach thus has much to do with the wish not to do harm and **to respect the diversity, heterogeneity, complexity and instability of social life.**

**The academic study of religions** represents, for the most part, **an exercise in asymmetry.** Neglecting the voices of women and favouring men’s worlds; preferring the voices of experts over those of lay participants, of elites over ordinary folk; siding with the winners against the losers (e.g. through concepts such as heresy) are all important features of the tradition of the discipline. Often it sides with strong parties in controversies instead of studying the course and outcomes of such controversies, and their implications and significance for actual cultural practices. Moreover, a significant tendency towards asymmetry lies in the dominance over the studied “subjects” (especially – but not exclusively – colonial) facilitated by the promotion of the concept of religion itself.

As this brief overview indicates, to practice (the) social scientific study (of religions) as a symmetrical endeavour is a difficult task. Yet we think that it is not only worth trying, but that it has already been undertaken, however rarely. Consequently, **the aim of this workshop is to promote, elaborate and share ideas and examples of good practice with respect to**

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**the symmetrical approach** in (the) social scientific study (of religions). We therefore invite presentations on topics such as:

- Overviews of particular **research projects based on the symmetrical approach**, or those that respect the principle of symmetry in their design and realization, as well as expositions of their methodologies and theoretical foundations.
- Reflections on **a/symmetries embedded in field research and in the writing of reports and papers** based on field data; presentations of difficulties in writing symmetrical accounts and strategies for dealing with them.
- Reflections on **a/symmetries embedded in the writing of historical accounts/studies** and strategies for writing histories symmetrically.
- **Theoretical reflections** on problems associated with a/symmetries in the social sciences, especially in the study of religions, and proposals for symmetrical paths to follow.
- **Reflexivity** and its consequences for conducting research and writing reports. How does respect for the principle of reflexivity shape our research and writing strategies? How can reflexivity be practised and how can we write reflexively?

We invite students of religions, qualitative sociologists, anthropologists, and historians to exchange ideas and scholarly experience at this **workshop on the symmetrical approach held in Brno, Czech Republic**.

- All interested scholars and students should submit their proposals for papers by **14 October 2012**.
- The papers may have the form of either **oral presentation** or **poster**.
- Detailed information concerning the workshop is to be found at the **workshop's website** [www.phil.muni.cz/relig/symmetry2012](http://www.phil.muni.cz/relig/symmetry2012).
- Any further questions may be addressed to Ms. Lucie Čechovská via the workshop's e-mail, **symmetry.workshop@gmail.com**.

We look forward to seeing you in Brno!

On behalf of the organizing committee

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Milan Fujda,  
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Dr. David Zbiral,  
*Czech Association for the Study of Religions,  
General Secretary*