

What is the Socio-Historical Method in the Study of Religion?

An Editorial By

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to answer what the socio-historical method is when applied to the study of religion, as well as detail how numerous disciplines (e.g. archaeology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, musicology, dramatology, etc.) contribute to its overall employment. In the broadest (and briefest) definition possible, a socio-historical study of religion coalesces the aims, philosophies, and methodologies of historiography with those of the social and cultural sciences, meaning it analyzes the interpretation and practice of religion through the lens of social/historical contexts, scientific discovery, and from within each faith tradition. The result is that the contexts surrounding a particular religion becomes the primary subject of study in order to better understand the origin, development, and expression of the religion itself. This article explains that the socio-historical study of religion is, in essence, an eclectic methodology that focuses on describing and analyzing the contexts from which the interpretation and practice of religion occurs. The goal is to examine how different aspects of a religion function in the broader socio-political and cultural milieu. Its most fundamental postulation is that the social history of a religious community affects how it interprets and practices their faith. By approaching religious inquiry from a socio-historical perspective, researchers are better able to recognize religion as a cultural and institutional element in ongoing social and historical interaction. Three sections will help to explain the socio-historical method: 1) a definitional dissection of the term “socio-historical”; 2) an elaboration of the principles inherent to the methodology; and 3) a case study example of the socio-historical method in practice.*

Keywords: Socio-Historical Method, Social-Scientific Study of Religion, Religious History, Biblical Criticism, Higher Criticism, Social History, Humanities

Introduction

THERE EXISTS NUMEROUS APPROACHES to the critical study of religion, particularly as they relate to exegetical methods, sociology, and history. For instance, in hermeneutics, researchers can utilize historical-grammatical methods, orality, source, form, and redaction criticism, tradition-historical criticism, ideological criticism, and social-scientific criticism (just to name a

few).¹ Literarily, there exists rhetorical, canonical, genre, reader-response, and narrative criticism, in addition to inner-biblical, intertextual, structural, and poststructural methods of interpretation.² However, even when discussing sacred texts, the study of religion most often transcends the exposition of Scripture to include more socio-historical fields of research that do not always involve interpretation, such as textual criticism, linguistics, cross-cultural comparisons, discourse analysis, performance criticism, and sound mapping.³ This enlargement of religious research is the essence of a socio-historical methodology, which (particularly when not addressing sacred texts) involves sociology, psychology, historiography, and even philosophy, thereby distinguishing the socio-historical method from mere biblical or Qur'anic studies. The purpose of this article is to answer what, exactly, the socio-historical method is when applied to the study of religion, as well as detail how numerous disciplines (e.g. archeology, anthropology, theology, musicology, dramatology, etc.) contribute to its overall employment. The article explains that the socio-historical study of religion is, in essence, about the *circumstances* of religious expression; it is an eclectic methodology that focuses on describing and analyzing the social and historical *contexts* from which the interpretation and practice of religion occurs. Three sections will help to elucidate the socio-historical method: 1) a definitional dissection of the term “socio-historical”; 2) an elaboration of the principles inherent to the methodology; and 3) a case study example of the socio-historical method in practice.

Defining the Socio-Historical Method

In the broadest (and briefest) definition possible, a socio-historical study of religion coalesces the aims, philosophies, and methodologies of historical science with those of the social and cultural sciences, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and (more generally) religious history.

¹ For an overview of some of these hermeneutical methodologies, see Douglas Mangum and Amy Balogh, eds., *Social and Historical Approaches to the Bible*, vol. 3, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

² See Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes, eds., *Literary Approaches to the Bible*, vol. 4, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ Concerning the latter three, see Steven E. Runge, ed., *Discourse Studies and Biblical Interpretation: A Festschrift in Honor of Stephen H. Levinsohn*, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011); David M. Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 118–33; and Margaret E. Lee, ed., *Sound Matters: New Testament Studies in Sound Mapping*, vol. 16, Biblical Performance Criticism (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

case study, researchers are better able to recognize religion as a cultural and institutional element in ongoing social and historical interaction.³⁵ At its core, the socio-historical method brings together multiple relevant fields of study, both secular and religious, by adapting the insights of those disciplines for use in the study of religion. As a paradigmatic methodology, its eclecticism is then employed to inform other subdisciplines within religious studies, such as the philosophy, sociology, and psychology of religion. The term “socio-historical” itself suggests a compilation of diverse methods, particularly historical-descriptive, theoretical, and social-analytic forms of inquiry.³⁶ As such, the historical, social-scientific, and cultural-analytic elements work symbiotically together, correcting and regulating the findings of each discipline to produce a more refined and contextually-based study of religion than mere theological or basic comparative methods could produce on their own.³⁷

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³⁵ Theissen, “The Sociological Interpretation of Religious Traditions,” 177.

³⁶ Cf. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches*, 19–28.

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of the socio-historical method, see also Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

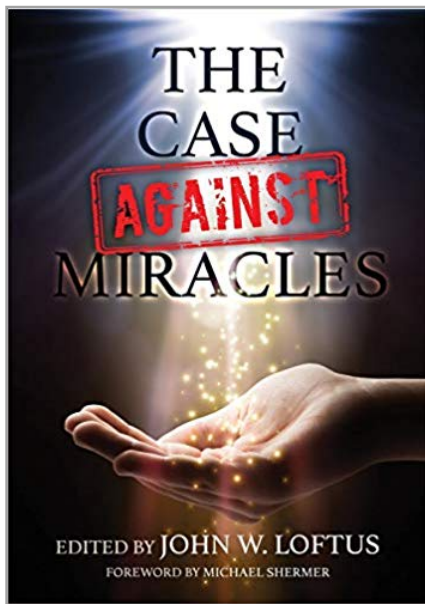
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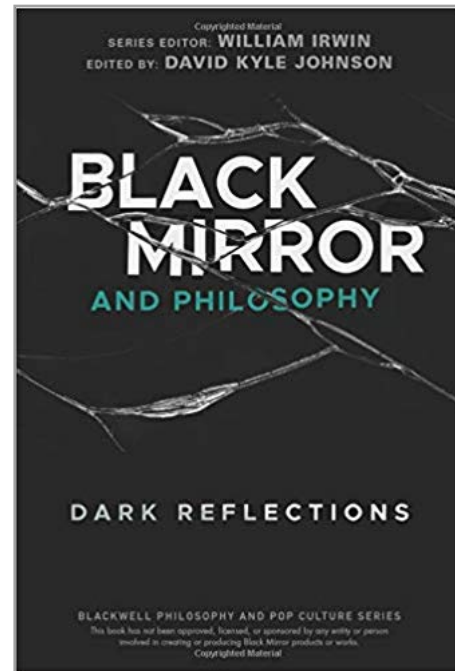
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