

CHAPTER 3

THEORIES OF RELIGION

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

- There are two types of theories: top-down theories that apply a theoretical apparatus (cognition, evolution, social systems, etc.) to religion; and bottom-up theories that try to elaborate one, aiming initially to explain or interpret a given set of empirical phenomena.
- The emergence of theories of religion has two preconditions: (a) it presupposes the existence of something (or some thing) called religion; (b) that thing, from at least some perspectives, constitutes some kind of problem or puzzle worth resolving.
- Theories of religion typically address the following five questions: (a) what kind of subject matter does religion constitute?; (b) what is the structure of religion?; (c) what is distinctive/specific about religion? (d) what are the origins of religion? (e) what are the effects, functions, or products of religion?
- Theories of religion provide a shared horizon of inquiry in the study of religion\s; implicit theories underlie empirical work and the potential achievability of explicit theories is a regulative idea for the discipline.
- The distinction between data and theory is best conceived of in a relative sense; there is no qualitative abyss separating data and theory.
- There are different aims and ways of assessing theories and their use in research. Theories of different types play different roles in relation to specific constellations of theory, methods, and data, and they must be assessed in that context.

INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND THEORIES OF RELIGION

While the notion of theory continues to show “a bewildering variety of meanings” (Wiebe 1983, 295) in the study of religion\s as much as in other disciplines, in this

chapter we operate with a broad notion of ‘theory’ as an interconnected set of ideas or statements (propositions) expressed in language that, from within a certain discursive placement and from a given point of view (which implies certain interests and values), frames cognitive claims about some phenomenon (here: ‘religion’).

Our focus here is one segment of theory in the study of religion\,s, namely theories of religion, i.e. theories that seek to account for religion by explaining what it is, what it does, how it originates, etc. If one holds, as a reader of this chapter suggested, that scholars of religion study a peculiar domain of human thought and behavior related to assumptions about a certain kind of agents or beings, a theory of religion will address the nature of this domain. Theories of religion in this sense are distinct from more general theoretical approaches that are sometimes brought to bear on issues of religion: e.g. cognitive, evolutionary, hermeneutic, Marxist, postcolonial, (post)structuralist, semiotic, semantic, etc., as discussed in Part II of this book. These and other approaches are put to work in many kinds of research, and sometimes, albeit rarely, one finds theories of religion built on them. These by-products of more general paradigms are then labeled as cognitive, evolutionary, Marxist, critical, feminist, social systems, etc. theories of religion. Such theories are rarely proposed by scholars of religion (in a disciplinary sense), but occasionally scholars of religion (e.g. Martin Riesebrodt, Thomas Tweed) have developed theories of religion of their own, which make use of certain concepts and ideas that connect them to more general theoretical approaches but which are not an outgrowth of any of the above-mentioned paradigms.

Our focus here is on the work of scholars explicitly interested in theory with a specific focus on religion. Theory of religion in this sense is just a fraction of the theoretical output and concerns in the study of religion. Many scholars will associate theories of religion primarily with reading and ‘drawing on’ the works of classics such as Marx, Tylor, Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Geertz, and others. This chapter does not advocate one theory of religion, but engages in meta-theoretical reflections on the corpus of contemporary (rather than classical) theories, in order to sketch a range of issues and positions. Meta-theoretical, theoretical, and methodological pluralisms are inescapable and often healthy aspects of the study of religion\,s, as they are throughout the humanities and social sciences.

THE PROBLEMATIC OF RELIGION

A precondition for the emergence of theories of religion is that religion means something worthy of theorizing. This has two implications: (a) a theory of religion presupposes the existence of something (or some thing) called religion, whether discursively constructed, ontologically distinct, or some other form of object; and (b) that thing, from at least some perspectives, constitutes some kind of problem or puzzle worth resolving. On the face of it, both features are the outcome of modern European history.

Religion—even if understood in different manners—emerged as some sort of stable object in the work of various theoreticians since the seventeenth century. For the early

theoreticians—down to the nineteenth century almost exclusively philosophers—religion was largely identical with Christianity, but the scope of the term eventually broadened to include non-Christian specimens of the (presumed) genus. One the main axes of the modern concept of religion appears to be the plurality of religions that are held to exemplify the singular category (Hermann 2015).

Early theoreticians of religions addressed a number of issues, especially the following:

- the origin(s) of religion, sometimes conceived as the idea of a ‘natural religion’;
- forms or types of religion, e.g. public/private/positive/civil, monotheism/polytheism, etc.;
- religion’s (ir)rationality;
- religion’s social functions and consequences, in particular in relation to the state and morality and as causes for war and conflict.

In general terms, these earlier discussions clustered along two broad lines that continue to frame current debates: problematizing religion itself and discussing its relation to—or impact on—other aspects of society or on society as a whole. Philosophical theories of religion, in particular since the Enlightenment, have not been merely analytical and descriptive: they have often taken the form of either critique or apology. This reflects the emergence of the ‘secular option,’ i.e. “the move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (Taylor 2007, 3). In this context, we can replace the philosopher’s ‘belief in God’ by ‘religion.’ In this light, religion, and being religious, have lost their assumed natural status and have become negotiable. This process has taken several centuries, from intellectual critiques of religion to the spread of non-religion among broader segments of the population (see Lee, “Non-Religion” this volume). The trend to argue for or against religion (and the existence of God) continues in traditional philosophy of religion. Similarly, some of the classical social scientific or psychological theories of religion were informed by anti-religionism (Marx, Freud) or presented religion as something to be overcome (Tylor, Frazer). The idea that religion does not exist, being just a word, is a continuation and to some extent a radicalization of the de-naturalizing tradition of critique. On the other hand, there are theories sympathetic to religion, even if not explicitly apologetic with respect to specific religions (e.g. Eliade or, for contemporary theories, Stark/Finke). Theoretical approaches that hypothetically or seemingly re-naturalize religion—for example as by-products of cognitive processes (Boyer 2001), or as stimulating solutions to evolutionary problems such as the establishment of trust among strangers in the formation of large groups (Norenzayan 2013)—could be read as providing potential defenses of religion even if they were not written in that spirit.

On a different level of analysis, religion may be seen as a problem inherent in modern Western society that has ‘modernity’ as its founding narrative. Hans Kippenberg (2001) has argued that the emerging field of the history of religions was centrally occupied with the ‘other half’ of modernity, namely those aspects of life not at the service of the idea

of progress. Historians of religion drew upon themes such as nature mysticism, soul, rituals, magic, mysteries, ecstasy, and salvation, in order to address forces considered obsolete and past, yet still powerfully present even in modern societies. From a theoretical point of view, standard views of religion—as something traditional, grounded in the eternal and the supernatural, operating with symbols, and committed to the ritual recovery of the mythical—seem to contradict the spirit of modernity, with its claim of relentless self-reflection (Benavides 1998)—which melts everything that is solid into air, starting with religion. In this sense, dominant narratives of modernity frame religion as the ‘other’ and thus as a fundamental problem or threat.

Starting Points for Theories of Religion

In general terms, there are two types of theories: those that apply a theoretical apparatus (cognition, evolution, social systems, etc.) to religion; and those that try to elaborate a theoretical apparatus based upon the study of putatively religious phenomena. The former is more top-down, aiming at a general account, and the latter is bottom-up, seeking initially to explain or interpret a given set of empirical phenomena. Here, we review selected examples of the latter sort, which results in theories that are more characteristic of the discipline, as opposed to top-down applications of more general theoretical perspectives.

Philologist Walter Burkert (1996), an expert on Greek and Near Eastern religions, employs a variety of theoretical perspectives to make sense of findings of religious behavior and integrate them in an overarching theory of religion—where religion is a strategy of human survival between biology and culture (see Benavides in Stausberg 2009b). Turning to contemporary Western societies, sociologist Rodney Stark, who has been involved in studies of American religion since the 1960s, has—first with William Sims Bainbridge then with Roger Finke—developed a theory of religion that resonates with his view of the vitality of the American religion scene or market and goes against a perceived atheist bias and focus on human irrationality in earlier social science theories of religion (Stark/Bainbridge 1987; Stark/Finke 2000). He emphasizes the rationality of religious choices, the importance of competition for religious vitality, and the relative advantages of strict or costly forms of religion, which are in tension with their environment (see Alles in Stausberg 2009b).

Fieldwork also offers a launching point in the search for more adequate theories. Thomas Tweed writes that his theory of religion arose out of dissatisfaction with available theories of religion for making sense of his observations at a shrine attended by Cuban exiles in Miami, Florida. Accordingly, he builds his own theory around the three leitmotifs of movement, relation, and position (Tweed 2006, 4–5) that emerged from his fieldwork. Just as these exiles had crossed the waters between Cuba and Florida, his theory strategically engages with aquatic tropes, and his two main axes are crossing boundaries and making homes.

Broader reviews of religious material also motivate dissatisfaction with existing theory. Sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt (2010 [2007]), like Tweed, reviews data for a wide range of Eastern and Western religions. For him, interventionist practices that establish and maintain contact with superhuman powers are at the core of religions, and these practices ground religions' promises to avert misfortune, overcome crises, and achieve salvation for groups and individuals (see Stausberg in Stausberg 2009b; see Flood, "Salvation," this volume, on the core concept of salvation).

With a more explicit assessment of theoretical resources in the study of religion, Manuel Vásquez, a trained sociologist, reports that the available theoretical 'canon' was "for the most part unhelpful" for addressing "the religious creativity, cross-fertilization, and fluidity that accompany globalization, particularly . . . the ways in which transnational immigrants transform both their countries of origin and settlement by generating hybrid identities, practices, and spaces" (Vásquez 2011, 1). Accordingly, he provides a genealogy of three fields of theoretical investigation in a variety of disciplines and fields, namely body, practice, and space. Vásquez finds that these are the "key sites where some of the most innovative and potentially influential non-reductive work on religion is taking place" (2011, 11). Vásquez's guiding framework is that of a non-reductive materialism, i.e. a position that emphasizes "the material constraints and possibilities entailed by our being-in-the world through our physical bodies" (2011, 6) without wishing to reduce everything to matter and without being andro- and anthropocentric and by remaining attentive to complexity, emergence, situatedness, and openness. By competently engaging with a vast panorama of theoretical work, Vásquez enriches readers' understanding of body, practice, and space in relation to religion, but leaves the identification of religion deliberately untouched.¹

FIVE QUESTIONS

Theories of religion typically address the following questions, which serve as the central foci of different theories and as the motivation for the building of new theories (see also Stausberg 2009a):

1. What kind of subject matter does religion constitute?
2. What is the structure of religion?
3. What is distinctive/specific about religion?
4. What are the origins of religion?
5. What work does religion do (effects, functions, or products)?

¹ *More than Belief* was discussed in review symposia published in *Religion* 42(4) (2012) and *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24(4–5) (2012).

Religion as Subject Matter

The word religion has a long history going back to antiquity (see Casadio 2010 for the meaning of the term in Latin sources from antiquity). Various studies have examined the trajectories of the word through European history (e.g. Despland 1979; Feil 1986–2007; Smith 1998; Fitzgerald 2007; Nongbri 2013; see Casadio, “Historicizing and Translating Religion,” this volume). One reading of these works is that there has not been one single transhistorical European concept of religion. The extant studies are based on literary sources and therefore reflect the way ‘religion’ was used, understood, and developed by literate elites. We know virtually nothing about popular concepts of religion. Even though we might consider ‘the emic’ as a relatively unproblematic entry point for what counts as religion (Vásquez 2012, 660), we have no empirical studies on emic everyday concepts of religion for the modern and contemporary periods (see Bergunder 2014, who proposes that genealogies of these are the genuine subject matter of religious studies). The situation has become even more complex since ‘religion’—during the course of Western expansion and colonialism—has spread to other parts of the world, where Western notions of religion have been appropriated first by literary elites and then diffused into the broader population, partly in line with further processes of Westernization. This diffusion and appropriation has occurred against the background of emic semantics and vocabularies as a process of translation (see Casadio, “Historicizing and Translating Religion,” this volume, for premodern processes of intercultural interaction and semantic interpenetration). The status of religion as an object of study has been problematized by the constructionist views of what we might call ‘critical’ scholars of religion—Russell McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, and others—whose work resonates with that of J. Z. Smith and Talal Asad. Recognizing the historicity (and ethnocentrism) of the category of religion, such critics have concluded that “there is no such thing as ‘religion’” or “no such entity as ‘religion’”; in other words, “Religion as a distinct and substantive reality in the world . . . is a myth” (Arnal 2000, 32; Atran 2002, 264; Fitzgerald 2007, 9). This position denies that there is some stable, ontologically distinct domain, entity, or thing ‘out there’ in the world to which the word ‘religion’ refers. It holds that ‘religion’ is a discursively constructed concept, with no extra-linguistic referent: it is a word that refers to other words, not a word that refers to a thing.

On a strong interpretation, this ‘no such religion’ position implies that theorizing must aim at the cross-cultural or even the universal, rather than the historical and contextual and, even more radically, that the historicity and the constructed nature of an expression disqualifies its spectrum of reference from theoretical scrutiny. This would presuppose that certain concepts do in fact escape historicity and discourse, with this protection from historicity providing an Archimedean point of objectivity and innocence that would ground real theorizing. But it remains unclear what these might be, how we are to distinguish them from less stable concepts, and how they could be verifiably translated into the necessarily situated discourses of the study of religion/s.

The ‘standard’ line among ‘critical’ theorists is generally framed in more limited terms: methodological consequences stem not from the fact that religion is a construct but from the manner of its construction. The claim is not just that religion refers to words rather than things; it is that it refers to a certain set of other concepts, formed in a specific cultural and historical context. On this view, ‘religion’ means what it means not because it refers to religious things (there are no such things), but because it refers to such things as ‘non-political,’ ‘non-scientific,’ ‘non-public,’ etc. ‘Religion’ makes no sense apart from “what in shorthand gets called the religion-secular dichotomy” (Fitzgerald 2007, 232); another variant of this view is “that cross-cultural or non-specific characterizations of so-called religious phenomena are distorting, that the phenomenology of religion is in fact a phenomenology of the Modern state” (Arnal 2000, 32).

Claiming that there is no such ‘thing’ as religion raises the question what one means by ‘thing’ or ‘entity.’ The critics can hardly think of simple material objects; that would merely be stating the obvious. Probably, what they mean is that religion ‘only’ has a linguistic or discursive nature: there is only the word, but no related extra-linguistic thing. This would shift the focus of the theoretical endeavor from religion to ‘religion,’ where a theory of ‘religion’ would need to explain, for example, how that specific word originated and came to be connected to certain discursive positions and claims, how it allowed people to do important things with it, how its discursive efficiency works differently from that of other words, and how it is connected to other words.

In sum, clarifying the ontological status of religion is a major requirement for a theory of religion. This is not to suggest that there is some one correct view on this matter; rather, theories of religion must address this unavoidable issue. The deflationary claim that ‘religion’ is nothing but a word—when supplemented by the view that this is hardly unique to religion—usefully emphasizes the role of action, language, and intentionality in the creation of social reality. If we grant that social/human reality (minimally) is constructed and is not independent of human action, communication, and intentionality, this does not make it less real (Stausberg 2010; Schilbrack 2014, 89–92).

The Structure of Religion

The question of the structure of religion—its component elements and their relations to each other—has received relatively little attention in theories of religion. Many theories regard religion as an integrated unit comprising several aspects, components, dimensions, elements, facets, or parts. At the outset of his classical study, Émile Durkheim announced his intention to proceed “as if religion were to form a kind of indivisible unit”; but, at the same time, he refers to religion as “a more or less complex system of myths, teachings, rites, and ceremonies” (Durkheim 1912, 49 [trans. Stausberg]). A whole, he adds, can only be defined relative to its constituent parts (Durkheim 1912, 49).

In later sociology of religion, an influential mapping of religion along five dimensions was suggested by sociologist Charles Glock (1962) in the context of a discussion

of religion in the United States; he distinguished the following dimensions: experiential, ritual, belief intellectual, intellectual, and application (Glock/Stark 1965). The model was then used and refined in a book that Glock co-published with Rodney Stark (Stark/Glock 1968). The work of Ninian Smart has been particularly influential in the study of religion/s. Smart introduced his own dimensional model to achieve balance so that description and theory of religion are not 'lopsided' (Smart 1996, 8); the other reason is to provide an alternative to simple definitions. Smart distinguishes between 'most basic' dimensions (Smart 1996, 10): ritual or practical; doctrinal or philosophical; mythic or narrative; experiential or emotional; ethical or legal; organization or social; material or artistic. In addition, he pays attention to the political and economic dimensions of religion. This 'anatomic' model is still used in recent theoretical publications. Schilbrack, for example, while referring to Smart (Schilbrack 2014, 26), operates with a model comprising five dimensions organized around key 'interests' pursued by different religions (Schilbrack 2014, 14–18). While this kind of dimensional anatomy seeks to capture the empirical complexities of religion, the distinctions as proposed seem either common-sense or improvised; the theoretical principles underlying these distinctions await further clarification—if one wants to continue with this model at all.² Its value seems to reside more on its analytical and hermeneutical affordances. One problem with this model is that each of the dimensions is as complex as religion; ritual, for example, shares many conceptual and theoretical complexities and predicaments with religion and can in turn be anatomized into different dimensions.

Ann Taves proposes 'building blocks' as an alternative metaphor (2009; 2013). This implies a different perspective altogether, which could avoid a problem with dimensional theorizing. Acknowledging that religion is a complex cultural concept, she proposes to break different established definitions of religion down into more basic components. In particular, Taves proposes to address processes involving imagination, setting apart (so that some things are considered more salient than others), and valuation (so that some things are treated as more significant than others). This strategy connects religion to more basic levels of cognitive or psychological analysis that operate across cultures and historical periods. Yet, this approach is not without challenges. These different processes interconnect in an arbitrary fashion, as they were identified on the basis of a pre-selected set of definitions of religion; e.g. setting apart draws on Durkheim and valuation on Tillich. The question then becomes how one reassembles these different processes—or just what the motivation would be for attempting to do so. Having let different building blocks escape the bottle, how do we get them back in?

² In the psychology of religion, the multidimensional character of the construct religion is generally recognized: "the empirical stream of religious measurement has developed and supported a multi-dimensional model of religiousness" (Hall/Meador/Koenig 2008, 154). There have been several attempts (usually employing factor analysis) to operationalize and specify the dimensions: an early example of a study based on factor and cluster analyses was King (1967) who proposed nine dimensions. In the sociology of religion, a dimensional model was relaunched and tested with a large sample of American Mormons by Cornwall et al. (1986). Koenig (2011, 210–215) provides an unsystematic list of sixteen dimensions that have been used in psychological health/religion research.

If the specification of building blocks was based on a different initial set of definitions, other cognitive or psychological processes could be identified by the same methods. What would protect the selection of definitions and the resulting set of building blocks from the charge that they are completely arbitrary? Is it simply the label on the bottle ('religion') that contingently links these building blocks together? On this view, the real explanation for the (historical and/or conceptual) emergence of religion would occur on the level of cultural labeling; from a theory of religion we would arrive at cultural and social history.

The third strategy—fractionation—explicitly takes this step toward cultural and social contextualization. The program here is "to fractionate religion into numerous different traits, each of which must be explained on its own account," as Harvey Whitehouse (2008, 35) puts it. This program is a prominent approach in the Cognitive Science of Religion (see Geertz, "Cognitive Science," this volume). While Whitehouse has a tendency to dichotomize rather than to fractionize—for him variation typically can be assigned to two contrasting or opposite modes or processes (see, e.g., Whitehouse/Lanman 2014)—other scholars posit a variety of unrelated processes. Anthropologist Pascal Boyer is a prominent voice. He suggests "a fractionated model of religious cognition, in which different aspects of religious thought and behavior activate different mental capacities" (Boyer 2010, 28). He wishes to overcome any singular notion of religion, which he finds misleading: "We understand better all these phenomena once we stop believing that they are *sui generis* and belong together" (Boyer 2010, 23). The set of things commonly described as religions are an "amorphous mixture" that "does not really exist, either as a set of mental phenomena in anyone's heads or as a social or cultural phenomenon" (Boyer 2010, 10). He speculates that the 'illusion' that these things stem from one and the same cultural domain is the result of a clever marketing strategy of "a single institution, the guild of religious officers" (Boyer 2010, 21), but he does not provide any explanation for this strategy's tremendous success.

Another influential evolutionary anthropologist, Scott Atran (2002, 265), has produced a theory that is fractional in origin but not with regard to structure or effects. Atran claims that "Religious belief and practice involve a variety of cognitive and affective systems, some with separate evolutionary histories and some with no evolutionary history to speak of." These, he speculates, "have been culturally co-opted, or 'exapted,' in religion to new functions" (Atran 2002, 265). Yet, contrary to Boyer, Atran claims that "All religions follow the same structural contours" (2002, 266). So, even if religion is grounded in an originally heterogeneous assembly of brain and body systems, their products converge in an evolutionary landscape, and religion has powerful psychological and social effects. Contrary to Boyer, Atran's account delineates a scenario in which the different systems interact in a coherent manner, so that the initial fractionizing model is effectively overcome.

Metaphors of dimensions, building blocks, or originally independent systems generally presume that the different subunits operate in a non-hierarchical manner: one dimension, building block, or system is not more important or central than

the others.³ However, some theoreticians delineate the structure of religion in a more hierarchical manner. Historian of religions Bruce Lincoln (2003, 3–7) outlines a structure that leads from religious discourse—characterized by specific claims to authority, truth, and transcendent status—to religious practices, a community, and an institution. Lincoln refers to these four units as ‘domains’ (2003, 7), and he emphasizes their various cross-relations. However, the latter three all require the domain of discourse as their prerequisite, thereby creating a hierarchical structure. The late Martin Riesebrodt, who based his explanation of religion on the systematization of insider perspectives on meaningful social actions, distinguished between three sets of practices, namely interventionist, discursive, and behavior-regulating. Interventionist practices are practices, “which aim at establishing contact with superhuman powers” (Riesebrodt 2010, 75). For Riesebrodt, interventionist practices are central for religion, and while the different kinds of practices are ‘interconnected,’ discursive and behavior-regulating practices are of a ‘derivative’ significance (Riesebrodt 2010, 86). Here we find a similar hierarchical structure as with Lincoln, but with an interesting inversion of emphasis, leading to different foundational theories: for Lincoln, discourse is central and practices derive from discursive claims; whereas for Riesebrodt discourse derives its authority from practices that establish connections with the superhuman.

The Distinctiveness of Religion

Most contemporary scholars of religion reject the idea that religion is a *sui generis* entity, i.e. an isolated thing set apart, following its own rules and unexplainable in non-religious terms. Debates over this inflated notion of distinctiveness should not overshadow the question whether and how religion can be distinguished from other phenomena—as many people the world over habitually distinguish religion from other domains such as economy, politics, etc. One question is whether it is sufficient that this distinction is made by the theorist or whether this distinctiveness must be articulated by the respective data or people concerned. While concepts of ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ served to anchor the distinctiveness of religion in some earlier theories (and continue to do so in the psychology of religion [e.g. Pargament/Magyar-Russell/Murray-Swank 2005]) several contemporary theories refer to notions of the superhuman, the supernatural, the non-empirical, the transcendent, absolute authoritativeness, immunity from falsification, etc. as the distinctive features and factors. While some theories treat the existence of these notions as given, others—such as cognitive theories—seek to explain their emergence, thus leading to the question of origins. Like most theories in the humanities

³ Even on this point Atran tends to leave a purely fractionated account behind when he states (2002, 267): “it should be patent that supernatural agency is the principal conceptual go-between and main watershed in our evolutionary landscape.” This would imply that supernatural agency (on which see Pyysiäinen 2009) is the main factor of religion.

and social sciences, cognitive theories explain notions of the supernatural, etc. as human creations or products of psychological processes. This anthropocentric ontology is questioned by theories that remain open towards or even affirm the existence of the meta-human. Gavin Flood, for example, claims “There is a reality that human beings encounter which shows itself to us through religion” (2012, 15).

Origins of Religion

The question of the origin(s) of religion should not be confused with that of its beginning(s). Both questions are informed by one’s concept, definition, and views of the ontology, structure, and distinctiveness of religion. Is myth a dimension of religion or an independent mental structure? Depending on one’s position, the putative emergence of mythic culture (Donald 2001) would have implications for the putative beginnings of religion. If one follows Rappaport’s (1999) speculations that religion is ultimately grounded in the structure of human language and communication, then religion’s beginnings would be identical with the dawn of human language. Sociologist Robert Bellah (2011) grounds religion in the human capacity for play and inscribes the emergence of religion into the deep history of the earth and humanity. So far, there is neither a robust debate nor a consensus concerning the beginnings of religion, probably because the question is to some extent circular and speculative, and because it involves the study of prehistory, a period investigated by few scholars of religion. Another take on the issue is to insist on the modern beginning of religion as a global system: even if religions may have antedated globalized society, religion as a globalized function system, which we take as a self-evident category, may have only emerged in conjunction with the establishment of a globalized society (Beyer 2006).

One source for the origin of religion that is referred to by several theories is human meaning-making. This is a theme that runs across different disciplines; it is central in Weberian, Mannheimian, and Cassirerian traditions in sociology and philosophy, and plays a prominent place in the late-classical theories of religion (Geertz 1973 [1966]; Berger 1967). It continues to be a major theoretical anchor for theories of religion in the psychology of religion (Park 2013), among anthropologists of religion (Droogers/van Harskamp 2014), and scholars of religion (Jensen 2014). Meaning is addressed not only as a human capacity (Bellah 2011), but also in terms of a stipulated human need. In a phrasing that could seem to echo Mircea Eliade, Gavin Flood speaks of the “human quest for meaning,” to which he adds “an impulse towards transcendence” (Flood 2012, 17). Religion, on the other hand, is assumed to provide such meaning, for example by locating human “within an ordered cosmos” (Flood 2012, 55). In a very strong sense, Flood (2012, 27) claims: “Religions bestow meaning for human communities not as illusions—although they do that too—but because they access the ontological referent that gives rise to those meanings.” This can be read as an assumption of the reality of the transcendent. It is difficult to see how such a claim could be argued. Identifying human needs is part of a debate on human nature, but when speaking of meaning in

language and communication, semantics and semiotics are central (see Gardiner/Engler, “Semantics,” and Yelle, “Semiotics,” this volume). No theorist claims that religion is the exclusive domain of human meaning-making, but that it is one extreme form of it. While religion appears as one variety of meaning-making, some cognitive theories of religion (e.g. Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2003; Atran 2002; Norenzayan 2013), which ground the origin of religions in cognitive and affective processes and systems, navigate beyond the level of explicit meaning; they seek to explain the evolutionary effectiveness of representations and practices by appealing to a variety of psychological processes, which mostly operate subconsciously. This reflects different theories of culture and human nature.

Another set of contemporary theories of religion seek to explain the origin of religion in structures of cognition and processes of evolution. E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990), a scholar of religion and a philosopher respectively, consider the structure of religious-ritual systems as determined by cognitive competence for the representation of action (see Engler/Gardiner in Stausberg 2009b). For anthropologist Stewart Guthrie (1993), religion results from humans’ cognitive proclivity to represent the world as animated and humanlike (see Saler in Stausberg 2009b). Anthropologist Pascal Boyer (2001) and scholar of religion Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2003) explain religions as unintended by-products of brain functions that can help to solve challenges faced by humanity (see Jensen in Stausberg 2009b). Similarly, anthropologist Scott Atran (2002) theorizes religion on the basis of humanity’s evolutionary landscape (see Bulbulia in Stausberg 2009b).

Functions of Religion

The functionality of religion and its constituent parts—or the lack thereof—is an important theme in many theories of religion. From this perspective, religion is not the primary target (theoretical object) of theories of religion; rather religion is held to exemplify, identify, or resolve certain problems. Explanations of society in general or modern society in particular sometimes draw on religion in a dialectical manner, where religion is necessary for society and can be explained in terms of its function for society.

This sort of discussion of ‘functions’ has generally taken shape within, and over against, functionalist theories. In this context, it is important to distinguish between effects and functions. An effect is a state of affairs caused by some other. A function is an effect that contributes to a larger system. ‘Function’ is teleological; ‘effect’ may or may not be. Only some effects are functional: pumping blood and making noise are two effects of the heart, but only the first of these is a function.

Functionalism—in its sociological and anthropological variants—was rooted in the nineteenth-century analogy of society-as-organism. Two conceptual elements were central: an analysis of the parts of society—or religion—and their relation to the whole; and an implicit teleology, in which the ‘function’ of the parts is to maintain the stability of, or contribute to the evolution of, the whole. The most common functionalist claim

about religion has been that it contributes to social cohesion by creating and strengthening interpersonal bonds, for example in Durkheim (though his work is not entirely functionalist).

Although generally considered to have been discredited as a theoretical perspective, functionalism continues to have current and potential relevance for the study of religion (Stausberg 2010, 234–236). Functionalist accounts of religion are sometimes championed by non-scholars of religion in their writing on religion. The noted polymath Jared Diamond, for instance, proposes a list of seven ‘functions’ of religion (supernatural explanation; defusing anxiety; providing comfort about pains and death; standardized organization; preaching political obedience; moral codes of behavior towards strangers; justification of wars); Diamond claims that these functions changed as religion ‘evolved’ (Diamond 2012, 323–368).

Carl Hempel’s 1959 critique of functional explanations set the terms of subsequent debates (1994). To simplify, Hempel argued that functionalist claims are invalid because they commit the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent. That is, functionalist claims move backwards from observing an effect—e.g. social stability—to claiming that one particular thing—e.g. religion—is its cause. This ignores the possibility that something else might have caused that particular effect. However, as Robert Segal (2010) notes, this problem can potentially be avoided if we draw on discussions of functionalism that move beyond the narrow terms of the debate as set by Hempel. Segal suggests that—instead of arguments that position religion as the sole cause of certain effects, i.e. those that fulfill certain functions or needs—religion should be placed in a different sort of context, a functional context that examines the effects of religion as part of a larger system, taking into account the effects of comparable institutions: “One would not be considering religion as serving any need, be it an original need or a present need, let alone a distinctively religious need. Religion would be seen as doing something that it can do only because, however it got there, it is now part of a system far bigger than itself” (Segal 2010, 352). The function of religion is thus decoupled from its putative origins.

Communication is another function of religion prominent in functionalist theories. Roy Rappaport’s analysis of religious ritual—or of religion *qua* ritual—also emphasized the social function of communication: “In enunciating, accepting and making conventions moral, ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself. As such, ritual . . . is *the* basic social act” (Rappaport 1999, 138; see Segal in Stausberg 2009b). Niklas Luhmann viewed religion as a functionally differentiated subsystem of society, the specific function of which, as a form of communication, is to maintain the conditions of communication itself. It does so by managing the distinction between the observable and unobservable, between immanence and transcendence (Luhmann 2013 [2000]; see Krech, “Communication,” this volume). For Luhmann “religion grounds the ultimate indeterminability of all meaning; it absorbs the risk of failure inherent in all social representations and determinations” (Beyer in Stausberg 2009b, 99).

Evolutionary theories of religion echo functionalist views in their assessment of the adaptivity of religion, especially by framing religion as an evolved adaptation

with positive benefits to individuals and groups (though others argue that it is a by-product): e.g. religions function to limit individualistic and to further altruistic actions; the costliness of membership and participation in rituals functions to increase commitment and to decrease free-riders (see Shaver/Purzycki/Sosis, “Evolutionary Theory,” this volume). For biologist David Sloan Wilson (2002), religion is considered as explaining the emergence of human cooperation, where human groups are understood as evolutionary superorganisms (see Bulbulia/Frean in Stausberg 2009b). Even though he does not aim to present a new theory of religion, psychologist Ara Norenzayan (2013) is among those who find one variety of religion to have played a key role in the evolution of human prosociality.⁴ Of course prosocial behavior is not preselected: selections that turn out to have a recurrent functional effect are generally termed adaptations.

META-THEORY

Meta-theory addresses such issues as the nature, scope, roles, goals, and functions of theory in academic work. This chapter as a whole is meta-theoretical: it is *about* theories of religion. To conclude, we will address two meta-theoretical issues: the motivation for building or using theory; and the assessment of theories.

Do We Need Theories of Religion?

Advocating a pragmatic turn in the study of religion\’s, G. Scott Davis has recently dismissed the practice of and need for theory.⁵ As his critics point out (e.g. Hart 2012, 144), Davis’s notion of theory is particularly narrow. Davis himself indicates that his model of theory is that of some natural sciences (2012, 2). For him, theory is only applicable to “objects and events in the natural world”; and theories are “preferably couched in mathematical form” (2012, 2). Few scholars of religion would hold such a narrow sense of theory. Pointing to the example of Tweed (2006), Davis claims: “What masquerades as theory is almost always . . . reflection on scholarly practice wrapped up in pithy metaphor. Debates about theory, at least in the study of religion\’s, have typically been contests to lay bare the presuppositions that have informed one or another scholar’s professional practice” (Davis 2012, 20). This is, of course, one of the functions of theory, defined more broadly. Davis suggests the following alternative to theory: “understanding religion requires nothing more than the sensitive and imaginative reading of human phenomena

⁴ *Big Gods* was discussed in review symposia published in *Religion* 44(4) (2014) and *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2015).

⁵ The title of the chapter—“Believing and Acting: The Allure of Method in the Study of Religion”—exemplifies a widespread confusion between ‘method’ and ‘theory’ in our discipline (Davis 2012, 1).

informed by the best available ethnography set in the best available historical narrative” (2012, 3). Probably, this is an idea shared by many practitioners in the field.

Setting aside the philosophically motivated narrowness of Davis’s definition of ‘theory,’ he in effect advocates the status quo in the academic practice of the discipline as he points to ethnography and history as paths to ‘understanding’ religion. Most scholars of religion study one religion, one period, or one region either ethnographically or historically, and some in both ways. For Davis, theory distracts, and methodology counts: it is not the ‘best available’ theory that promises to help us understand religion, but the best available use of established methods. It is exceedingly rare that a scholar who has worked empirically (e.g. ethnographically, historically, etc.) dares to take a broader stance by either extrapolating a theory of religion from her/his empirical case, or by putting one’s case in a broader comparative context in order to build a theory of religion. Instead, theories are mostly advanced by scholars working in disciplines that have stronger traditions of generalization. The reluctance to engage in active theory building may be understandable, but at the same time scholars draw on general theories of religion at some point or another in teaching or research, though with a bias in favor of the classical ones. Grand theory is in demand because it provides a view on the forest, whereas scholars of religion tend to concern themselves with trees. It is helpful to realize that they form part of the same landscape—theory providing the constitutive interconnectivity that makes an observer recognize the similarity across family members. This is perhaps why new theories of religion—at least when they are launched by scholars with a sound record of empirical work—tend to attract attention. Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006), for example, is his most often cited publication, Vásquez’s *More than Belief* (2011) was discussed extensively in specialist journals (see note 2), and Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) was discussed widely in academic and popular journals (see Stausberg 2014).

Levels of Theory

Different disciplines and subdisciplines have customs—and individual scholars have habits—regarding the definition of ‘theory.’ ‘Middle-range theories’ are especially prominent in the study of religion/s: i.e. “theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities” of those phenomena considered relevant to a given discipline (Merton 1967 [1949]: 39). Of course, even very broad theories can be nested within higher-level ‘super-theories,’ or within broad meta-theoretical positions. Evolutionary theory is the most influential theory of this sort in the natural, social, and human sciences today.

Theoretical work is not limited to the highly abstract level of fully-developed theories of religion. Categorizing and re-describing one’s empirical materials, seeking correlations, defining terms, using categories and concepts to compare cases, elaborating models and general propositions, all these and many other aspects of the research process

are acts of theorizing—modes of theoretical work—even if they are not cases of working with ‘a theory.’ Most theorizing of religion occurs below the level of abstraction of full-fledged theories of religion.

This perspective helps us to avoid the error of imagining that theory is some abstract, autonomous zone that stands apart from—or that floats freely above, as if transcending—the distinct zone of ‘facts’ or ‘data.’ It makes sense to contrast theory and data in a relative sense: e.g. insofar as theory addresses conceptual relations beyond the boundaries of a single instance of data, or in the sense that theory can be ‘applied’ to data. However, there is no qualitative abyss separating data and theory. Data are always already theory-laden. To give an obvious example, the data that scholars of religion choose to work with must somehow already have been identified as religious, but this presupposes a theoretical stance on the nature and scope of ‘religion.’ Even when not constructing theories of religion, scholars operate with implicit theories of religion. It is a mistake to think that data are simply brute facts of reality that can be directly observed. Such a view would reflect a naïve realist ontology and an anachronistic positivist view of science, both of which are untenable given the last seventy years of work on knowledge, language, meaning, science, etc. Minimally, after the linguistic turn and the demise of positivism, there is a scholarly consensus that there is no such thing as direct, unfiltered, unmediated access to reality.

Theory does not begin where data end: the two are always interwoven. Theory is always already present: it is there when any single fact, observation, event, or incident is linked in any way to any other; it is there when that first, single fact is selected out *as data*, as fodder for a given scholarly process or goal, as worthy of methodological interest. Theory, in this light, is what motivates data-collection and analysis. An ‘undertheorized’ case is one that takes its relevance for granted.

The entanglement of data and theory implies that theory is an inescapable element of all research. Theory is not limited to the ‘theory’ sections of publications. It is implicit in the treatment of empirical materials as data, as objects of study. It informs the concepts that are used (or not used) to make the data speak. It constitutes and is constituted by the relations between the concepts and categories that we use to ‘make sense’ of religious phenomena.

Assessing Theories

The success of a theory depends on what we think it should do. Theories that aim at explanation will be assessed more for accuracy and truthfulness, and theories that aim at interpretation will be assessed more in terms of the pragmatic value of their results in a given context. Of course, this difference is relative. There are several families or types of theories in the human and social sciences, with different histories and goals, and with distinct conceptual and normative commitments (Abend 2008; Mjøset 2012).

A basic issue determining the goal of theory, and hence how it should be assessed, is the place of theory in the research design of a given project: e.g. would it be more

effective for theory to be built up from cumulative conceptual work with empirical materials, as in grounded theory, or to be brought in after the empirical materials are collected and ordered, as a sort of interpretative frame? All theories raise general evaluative issues such as the salience of the phenomena conceptualized (e.g. in relation to established problems in the relevant literature), the relative coherence and completeness of the set of concepts informing the analysis, and interrelations between theory, data, and methods. At this level, criteria used to assess theories overlap with those used to assess methods (Stausberg/Engler 2011, 7–11). More specifically, theories can be assessed relative to a variety of ‘theoretical virtues’: internal validity (their well-formedness as a theory of their particular type), external validity (generalizability to other cases, again varying between types of theory), breadth (subsuming and relating a large number of phenomena), non-counterintuitiveness (harmony with established theories and perspectives), correctness of implications (e.g. successful prediction in the natural sciences or doctrinal acceptability in theology), and fruitfulness (pragmatic results).

Assessing theories (our topic here) differs from assessing a given use of a given theory. The latter would raise more contextualized questions, e.g. the competence of a given analysis. On a related note, researchers sometimes make the mistake of concluding that a theory is ‘falsified’ by the fact that it does not fit or resonate with their particular case or data. This falls into the trap of universalizing ‘theory,’ as if only one true theoretical perspective can exist. Different theories of different types play different roles in relation to a specific constellation of theory, methods, and data, and they must be assessed in that context. A mismatch between a given theory and one’s methods and data is a problem with that match, not with the theory.

Discussions about the value of theories have a social and political dimension: “the reception, survival and diffusion of intellectual products—whether as research programmes, theories, concepts or propositions—depends not just on the intrinsic quality of the arguments proposed or the strength of the evidence provided, but also on the range of rhetorical devices which the authors employ to locate themselves (and position others) within the intellectual and political field” (Baert 2012, 304). As discussed here, assessing theories involves rigorous, formal evaluation, as opposed to facile labeling, which often plays a tactical role in rhetorical positioning and struggles for academic capital. The use of superficial criteria devoid of specific assessment—e.g. new vs. old, ‘cutting-edge’ vs. ‘run-of-the-mill,’ philosophical vs. common sense—cuts both ways and generally tells us more about the self-perceptions of critics than about the theories that they critique.

CONCLUSION

There will never be a completely satisfying theory of religion. But ‘theory of religion’ can remain a regulative idea for the study of religion’s as a discipline, informing a collective recognition that it would be desirable and possible if not to ultimately

decode at least to throw light on the fundamental themes of theories of religion: What kind of a thing is religion? How does it work and what kind of work does it do? Why does it work as it does? How does it hang together? How does it originate and develop? Even if one has no answer to such questions, they linger in the background of scholars' work—theories of religion bring out this implicit preoccupation.

GLOSSARY

Data discrete bits of qualitative or quantitative information or knowledge; the 'raw materials' that are collected, measured, compared, ordered, analyzed, etc. during the process of generating scholarly knowledge. Data are not necessarily empirical in a narrow sense: e.g. concepts and theories can serve as data for higher level conceptualizing and theorizing.

Meta-theory theory about theory—and issues of conceptualization more generally—addressing such issues as the nature, scope, roles, goals, and functions of theory in academic work.

Methods ways of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data.

Theory an interconnected set of ideas or statements (propositions) expressed in language that, from within a certain discursive placement and from a given point of view (which implies certain contexts, interests, and values), frames cognitive claims about some phenomenon.

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- Vásquez 2011 [A genealogical overview of a wide variety of relevant theories—cumulatively making a case for greater emphasis on embodiment, practices, and emplacement within a proposed non-reductive materialist framework for the study of religion\ s.]
- Wiebe 1983 [A critical assessment of the place of 'theory' in the study of religion.]

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