

21ST CENTURY THEORIES OF RELIGION

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Chapter 1 ON THEORIES OF RELIGION

Varieties, distinctions, questions

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ON THEORIES OF RELIGION

Varieties, distinctions, questions

Michael Stausberg

This introductory chapter navigates the theoretical discourse in the study of religion/s with the aim of providing some conceptual signposts. It elucidates five kinds of ‘theory’ and proceeds to clarify the differences between theory/theories and related concepts and styles of investigation: metatheory, theorizing, ‘Theory with a capital T’, theoretical approaches, and theoretical ideas. Additionally, the discussion extends to the popular notion of ‘middle-range theories’. Central to the chapter is the proposed definition of ‘a theory of religion’ comprising seven elements. Moreover, the chapter suggests that theories of religion (as defined here) should ideally address, namely, (1) ontology (the ‘nature’ of religion), (2) specificity and distinctiveness of religion, (3) origins or genealogy of religion, (4) structure, configurations, or assemblages of religion, (5) the outcome, effects, or functions of religion. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the place and role of theories of religion in the study of religion/s and on the biases and limitations inherent in the present volume. We begin with a brief historical overview of the word ‘theory’, tracing its emergence and evolution, how it has acquired some of its current meanings.

The word: evolution and oppositions

If there ever has been a big word, it is ‘theory’. And this word has a long history, ultimately going back to ancient Greece. Looking into the early history of a word can be illuminating even though the origin of a word does not determine its present meanings. The illuminating aspect often takes the form of surprise at the unexpected. So also in our case. For the history of the Greek word θεωρία (theōría, ‘witnessing a spectacle’) takes us back to an established form of practice in the classical period (the fifth and fourth centuries BCE), where a male individual referred to as θεωρός (theōrós) would travel as an

envoy, either in private or official capacity, away from his city to see a special object or event, for then to return home; this ‘theorist’ thus was a spectator on a trip to witness and bring home some kind of visually captured truth. Greek truth seekers of the fourth century BCE who called themselves ‘philosophers’, Plato most famously among them, crafted a new regime and practice of knowledge. To brand and legitimate their new discipline with its key pursuit—the acquisition of a supreme form of wisdom—these men drew on the established form of the acquisition of insight, by calling it *θεωρία* (*theōría*) (Nightingale 2004).

Subsequently, the term ‘theory’ evolved to signify discursive and mental practices; thereby it acquired attributes that continue to echo in its contemporary usages. (See Liedman 2013 for a history of the idea of ‘theory’ from ancient Greek to contemporary philosophies.) In his *Nikomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) distinguished between three styles of life: the life of pleasure, the life of politics, and the theoretical life, the only activity that was not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Cicero (106 BCE–43 CE) translated *theōría* into Latin as *contemplatio*, and Boethius (480–524 CE) as *speculatio*, from the Latin *speculum* (‘mirror’) (Liedman 2013, 26). Accordingly, ‘theory’ came to be associated with the acts of speculation and contemplation. Inspired by another of Aristotle’s distinctions—between theoretical, practical, and technical knowledge—in post-classical Latin, from the fourth century onwards, the concept became opposed to a ‘practical’ approach. This contradistinction has continued into modern languages. In addition to this contrast, another semantic opposition that emerged is that with the empirical. When contrasted with both the practical and the empirical, theory can stand for impractical speculation without a basis in the real world, the contemplation of truths detached from material reality and from useful application. These meanings of the word ‘theory’ are still present in contemporary everyday language use. Another common meaning is that of explanation. In geology, Plate Tectonics Theory holds that the outer part of the earth (the lithosphere) is divided into different solid structures (tectonic plates), whose interactions explain phenomena such as earthquakes and volcanic activity. The Germ Theory of Disease explains that many diseases are caused by certain microorganisms. In popular parlance, narratives that draw on hidden forces to explain certain events are sometimes called ‘theories’. A ‘conspiracy theory’, for example, is an explanation of some occurrence as the alleged result of the sinister plotting of some obscure or secret power, like minorities or powerful elites. Similarly, theory is sometimes used to refer to idiosyncratic conjectures, guesses, hypotheses, or speculations about situations, outcomes, or the basic principles underlying them. In addition, claims, or assumptions about the nature of a phenomenon entertained in conversations or circulated across educational institutions and the media can be called ‘lay theories’ (see Stausberg 2009, 7–8 for lay theories of religion). Typically, academic scholarship challenges such lay theories, but public discourse can to some degree be receptive to academic theories as they diffuse through media outlets or popularization efforts. Academic theories distinguish themselves by a greater degree of elaboration in terms of systematic argumentation, coherence and complexity,

explicit background assumptions and critical reflexivity required by the parameters and assessment criteria of academic scholarship.

Varieties of ‘theory’

When reviewing the use of the word ‘theory’ in academic work, the philosophy of science, or across different disciplines, several meanings of this term can be distinguished. In sociology, for example, in a much-cited article Gabriel Abend has mapped seven things sociologists mean when they speak about ‘theory’ (Abend 2008). Steven Engler finds that four of these meanings resonate with work in the study of religion/s (Engler 2019). More recently, based on a review of a large corpus of works from various disciplines and fields of study, management scholars Jörgen Sandberg and Mats Alvesson have devised a five-fold typology of major forms and meanings of theory. Here is a redescription with the study of religion/s in mind, using ‘ritual’ as an illustrative example. (See Kreinath, Snoek and Stausberg 2007 for an annotated bibliography of ritual theory in the period 1966 to 2005.)

(1) Explaining

This is probably the meaning of theory that comes to mind first when one hears the T-word. The purpose here is to explain a relatively well-bounded (and hence also clearly definable) phenomenon like religion or ritual that is considered to exist ‘out there’ in history and different cultures. (For the relation of theory to ontological issues, see below.) This kind of theory aims at establishing a coherent and preferably even causally or hierarchically related set of conceptual variables that generate insight about the why and how, the inner workings of the phenomenon in question. The theory should fit the data, or even be empirically testable. While the conceptual apparatus and the assumptions are typically derived deductively from extant theories, for example from Cognitive Science, and then applied to religion or ritual, explaining theory can also be produced by generalizing inductively from a specific case or set of cases. For example, Harvey Whitehouse’s theory of ritual (see, e.g., Whitehouse 2021) has developed out of his studies of the Pomio Kivung, a so-called millenarian cargo cult in Papua New Guinea (Whitehouse 1995).

(2) Comprehending

This understanding of theory resonates with the kind of work commonly pursued in religious studies; it is typically related to interpretation and qualitative methods and often inspired by hermeneutics and phenomenology. ‘Meaning’ is the key concept here. The purpose of this type of theory is to comprehend layers of meaning of a phenomenon deeper than what simply strikes the eye of participants or observers. The phenomena are given, but their meaning needs

decoding. Once these deeper layers of meaning are deciphered, the how and why of the phenomenon will make fuller sense, enabling scholars to comprehend why people engage with the phenomena. This kind of theory does not aim to be testable, but to be applicable to other exemplars of the phenomenon. A classic example is Clifford Geertz's reading of the Balinese cockfight, which he has unpacked to a full theory of ritual (Geertz 1973, 412–453).

(3)Ordering

The purpose of the kind of theory labeled as ordering is to categorize phenomena; the phenomena are out there in the real world but are variously described, and this form of theory aims to reduce complexity by categorizing and grouping, by introducing classifications, taxonomies, or typologies. For this purpose, systematic comparison across a broad variety of cases is instrumental. Such a theory is considered successful if it manages to map the range of a phenomenon as commonly understood. It has an empirical grounding but seeks to get the messiness of the facts under control by arranging cases into a conceptual scheme. For ritual studies, we may think of part II of Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), where she first categorizes “the spectrum of ritual activities”, ranging from basic genres of ritual action to feasting, fasting, festivals, and political rites and then proceeds to group “characteristics of ritual-like activities” such as formalism, performance, etc. (Bell 1997, 91–169).

(4)Enacting/dynamizing

The basic agenda here is to go beyond explaining, comprehending, or ordering some kind of relatively stable phenomenon, by dynamizing the phenomenon. It is thereby conceived as ever in the making, as being constantly produced and reproduced, as ordered and reordered, as enacted and performed, as emergent and changing (and possibly even disappearing), as contextual, situational, strategic and embedded in relations of power. The phenomenon is less like a thing and more like a process. Sandberg and Alvesson call this form of theory ‘enacting’, but dynamizing seems more appropriate to capture the agenda. For ritual theory, we may here point to Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, where she proposed to “abandon the focus on ritual as a set of special practices in favor of a focus on some of the more common strategies of ‘ritualization’” (Bell 1992, ix), a strategic and distinctively situational way of acting that always operates in contradistinction to other forms of acting (Bell 1992).

(5)Provoking

This form of theory aims at challenging, debunking, and unsettling common-sense assumptions, which are considered misconceptions. Provoking theory is not satisfied with showing things in a different light but holds that things had

been different originally anyway. The novelty is to say that the phenomenon was made up to begin with. It denies that there is an empirical basis for what is commonly held but does not deny the existence of some empirical reality as such—if it were to be conceptualized more appropriately. In ritual theory, such a provocation was a paper by the anthropologist Jack Goody entitled “Against Ritual” in which he dismissed ‘ritual’ as a vague, limited, tautologous, dichotomous, trivializing, unsatisfactory, and counterproductive category that “seems likely to block research” (Goody 1975, 34); he therefore suggested to “dispense with ritual” (35). The theoretical agenda and attitude in this model of theory is encapsulated in Goody’s confession, “I don’t have to offer a way forward, only a way out” (41). Yet, provoking theory may also point to alternative pathways.

Sandberg and Alvesson present this classification of meanings of theory to level the playing field—to de-hierarchize understandings of theory—and to acknowledge more pluralistic and varied forms of knowledge development on complex themes (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021, 508). Such a move also seems timely for the study of religion/s. Most scholars would agree that religion is an extremely complex topic that can and should be addressed from a variety of epistemological and methodological angles, even though individual studies will stick to a limited range of forms of theory.

What qualifies as a ‘theory of religion’?

Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) claim that minimally the following seven elements must be present for something to be legitimately called ‘theory’; this applies to any of the five forms of theory outlined above. The seven elements are as follows (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021, 491):

1. having a purpose (e.g., to explain, comprehend, order, etc.)
2. being directed toward some phenomenon (e.g., ritual, religion, the body)
3. establishing a sort of conceptual order (i.e., concepts allowing to make distinctions, establish relations, or identify features)
4. offering novel or better insights about the phenomena (i.e., not just summarize current knowledge or common sense)
5. providing relevance criteria to allow for an assessment on how well it performs
6. having empirical support
7. expressing boundary conditions on the range of phenomena it seeks to cover or to exclude, “in the sense of *whom* the theory applies to, *when* it applies, and *where* it applies” (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021, 497).

Among the items on this list, Sandberg and Alvesson consider purpose (#1) the most important one, followed by the phenomenon (#2) accounted for by the respective theory (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021, 510). The respective purpose resonates with the different forms of theory reviewed in the

previous section. As we have seen in the example of ritual above, in many cases there is a correlation between these two features, so that a specific purpose matches a specific claim about the nature of the phenomenon that the kind of theory seeks to account for.

If we appropriate this list of elements for our purposes, then we arrive at the following definition of ‘a theory of religion’:

1. A theory of religion seeks to account for
2. religion
3. by establishing some kind of conceptual order
4. claiming to offer better insights than previous or alternative theories
5. providing relevance criteria to measure its persuasiveness
6. having empirical support
7. articulating clear boundary criteria on the kind and range of phenomena it seeks to address.

Distinctions on the field of theory/theorizing

Given this clarification of ‘a theory of religion’, I think some distinctions are in order.

(A)Theory vs. definition

Looking at the above list of elements of a full theory of religion, providing a new definition of religion could seem to be called for. After all, definitions typically provide short descriptions of the meaning of a word or the nature of something. Yet, just as there is a range of different meanings of ‘theory’, there are various meanings of definitions, and there is a range of forms and strategies of defining (Stausberg and Gardiner 2016; Engler and Gardiner 2023). Accordingly, there are different ways to frame the relationships between definition and theory. To begin with, a theory is a broader, richer, and more systematic exposition than a definition. (Crosby 1981, 5)

Minimally, we can distinguish between two rival positions of definitions in theories of religion: (a) definitions as starting points to delimit the subject matter (‘departures’); (b) definitions as summative statements of the theory (‘arrivals’). For the starting point strategy, we can recall the famous example of Émile Durkheim who provides the following definition at the beginning of his work on religion:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

(Durkheim 1995 [1912], 44 [italics in original])

Yet, this definition does not give a clear idea of the explanation Durkheim comes up with for this phenomenon; consider the absence in this definition of key concepts of his theory such as cult, sacrifice, society, and effervescence. For the summative statement kind of strategy, a classical example is a famous essay by Clifford Geertz, whose theory is a thorough explanation and defense of a definition (Geertz 1966). A more recent and somewhat different example of this strategy is the book by Thomas Tweed, which centers on his definition of religion: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006, 54; see also Jones Medine in this volume). Some theorists hesitate to provide a definition, because they feel that their theory has not yet reached its final form. The most famous example is Max Weber. Even though Weber is considered to have developed a theory of religion (where religions provide meaning systems like worldviews and reservoirs of ideas that frame actions and interest, and that steer forms and conducts of life), he never arrived at a definition. The reason is that he understood definition as a kind of definitive statement, a sort of discursive closure, a final word that settles the matter once and for all, after all is said and done (Weber 1993 [1920], 1; see also Greeley 1982). Apparently, he considered his thinking as provisional, as not yet fully concluded, so that he was not ready to provide a summative statement.

(B)Theory vs. metatheory

The discussion on different forms and meanings of theory is an example of metatheory. This is a theoretical discussion of theory—e.g., their features, properties, strengths and weaknesses, criteria of assessment, or exclusivity vs. combinability—for which theories, or theoretical discourse serve as ‘data’. In this sense, not only this introductory essay, but the entire present volume, which presents, reviews, and invites the readers to discuss several theories of religion, is an exercise in metatheory. The questions addressed in the title of this essay are metatheoretical in nature.

(C)Theory vs. theorizing

Theories are sets of discursive statements or narratives about a phenomenon, typically crafted on the basis of observation, comparison, and generalization, and transmitted (typically written) in ways that are accepted in the respective fields of scholarship. Theories often come with their own specific vocabulary, networks of terms built around some core concepts that are woven together in more or less coherent ways. Some are more hermetic and shielded than others. When speaking of theories, we usually have in mind published end-products that are then subject to interpretation and debate. The published theories are the result of (meta)theoretical work, including the study of previous and

alternative theories, using databases, reading and notetaking of other sources and materials, exploring and testing ideas, suggesting and refining definitions, finding good examples, visualizing arguments, writing, rewriting, and peer review. In this sense, constructing a theory is a kind of praxis (Reckwitz and Rosa 2021, 25).

In addition to the producing of theories, there is their reception, which is likewise a praxis. This starts with reading (or listening), excerpting, processing, comparing, contrasting, interpreting, discussing, debating, reviewing. Understanding theories can be a life-changing experience or yield aha-experiences but doing (reading) theory can provoke a range of emotional responses, from struggle, boredom, and fear to enthusiasm and excitement (Ehn and Löfgren 2013, 172–174). While theories can shine in their own light, they also call for appropriation by others, for being put to work to advance and resolve research question, to be projected onto new materials. Theories can be applied as a whole, in part (selectively), or potentially in combination with other theories. The application of theories is another dimension of the practical side working with theory, a ‘doing theory’. All this work with theory is ‘theorizing’: practices of production, reception, appropriation, and application of theories.

Yet, in a different sense of doing theory, ‘theorizing’ covers a range of praxis that “is considerably larger than that of conventional theory” (Swedberg 2017, 199). It is a form of discourse that draws on a range of theoretical tools like description-abstraction-generalization, induction-deduction-abduction, or concept-analogy-metaphor (Swedberg 2017, 192–197). While theorizing may aim at theory-building (Swedberg 2014, loc 251; Engler 2019) and thereby fall under the sense of theorizing explained above, doing theory is less concerned with exegesis, interpretation, and application of one theory, but with a more experimental use of theories to explore the world, as toolkits or as a laboratory; instead of coherence and closure, doing theory aims at opening up and creating connections (Reckwitz and Rosa 2021, 45–46, 147–148). Similarly, in our programmatically titled work *Theorizing Rituals* we have proposed ‘theorizing rituals’ as an addition to ritual studies and ritual theories as an emergent, open-ended reflexive process centered around a network of concepts from diverse theoretical background that are mobilized to make sense of rituals in the various stages of the research process (Kreinath, Snoek and Stausberg 2006).

(D)Theory vs. a theory

Theory can come in a broad or a narrow scope. Speaking of, for example, economic, psychological, or social theory addresses a broad corpus of theoretical work, out of which some main features are selected as typical or representative. A typical appeal to ‘economic theory’, for instance, could refer to decision making based on self-interest and to maximize profit. This, of course, is a very selective and superficial reading of theories in economics. Zooming in on such bodies of theory, one can identify specific theories. In ritual theory, for

example, the cognitive theories of Lawson and McCauley and Whitehouse are notably different both in the questions they ask and the answers they provide: identifying which sorts of rituals are held to be more effective and more central, which will be performed more frequently and which have a higher degree of sensory pageantry (McCauley and Lawson 2002), or binding people together to form groups as a kind of social glue (Whitehouse 2021). Both can fall under Cognitive Theory, but the resulting theories are very different.

Some versions of Theory derive their names in a genealogical manner, by being called after founding individuals. Consider ‘Darwinian’, ‘Freudian’, ‘Giradian’, or ‘Foucauldian’ Theory. ‘Foucault’ here means a set of concepts and ideas, a mode of thinking and writing, a series of books with this name on the cover rather than the historical individual Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Theories are typically created by individual persons. Exceptions prove the rule, but even the exceptions are typically limited to pairs of theoreticians such as Marx and Engels or, for more contemporary examples, Kahneman and Tversky in economics and psychology, Deleuze and Guattari in philosophy, Jean and John Comaroff in social anthropology, Laclau and Mouffe in political theory.¹ I am unaware of trios or collectives of authors that have produced groundbreaking theoretical work in the humanities and the social sciences.²

Contrary to Theory (with a big T), a theory—be it of the explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting (dynamizing), or provoking kind—is a discursive product seeking to account for a phenomenon by providing an argument and ordered set of concepts and observations that offers a new perspectives on the phenomenon in question, is informed by current research, has some empirical support and is authored by one or two qualified academics who have done the theorizing.

(E)Theory and theories vs. theoretical approaches

Similar to the examples in the preceding paragraph, where I referred to large bodies of theory that are typically tied to academic disciplines (such as economics, psychology, or sociology), we can also speak of theoretical approaches. A non-exhaustive list of theoretical approaches currently in vogue in the study of religion/s would likely include the following: aesthetic, cognitive, critical, discursive, ecological, evolutionary, feminist, hermeneutical, material, narrative, phenomenological, postcolonial, praxeological, semiotic, spatial, and visual approaches. Like Theory (with a big T), approaches accommodate a broad range of theories; for example, within the discursive approach, there are rivaling theories of discourse (critical, constructive, linguistic, etc.), and the material approach offers a range of theories of materiality. Approaches are often tied to specific methodologies and focus on specific aspects of a phenomenon. For example, an aesthetic approach to religion addresses issues such as the imagination, sound, smell, perception, touch, the body and its senses, absorption and immersion, atmospheres, etc. Scholars working within these theoretical

approaches have developed useful ideas or theories *for* studying religion; this book, however, focuses on theories *of* religion (see Minister and Bloesch 2023, 12 for this distinction).

(F)Middle range vs. general and grand theory

The American sociologist Robert Merton (1910–2003) has coined the term ‘theories of the middle range’; to him, this ‘middle range’ is the appropriate level (or scope) of theorizing in sociology. He situates this range of empirically grounded theorizing between “general theories” or “the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory” on the one hand and the “working hypotheses” of everyday research on the other (Merton 1968, 39). The suggestion is appealing because it promises to avoid two extremes: totaling theories, which in Merton’s analysis carry the outdated, misunderstood, and problematic legacies of certain philosophical systems and branches within the natural sciences he calls “the physical sciences” (47) on the one hand, and “descriptive data or empirical generalizations which remain logically disparate and unconnected” (61) on the other. It is the former that is his main target: sterile and empirically empty big theories that sought to explain everything (Sohlberg 2016, 191, 193). Yet, a close reading of his essay shows that “middle range theory is mainly a rhetorical concept used against the general system approach of Parsons” (Sohlberg 2016, 195). Merton’s discussion of his suggestion is fuzzy, “at best vague and metaphorical and at worst totally misleading” (Sohlberg 2016, 194).

Be that as it may, while many would agree that ‘totaling theories’ are unsatisfactory or even dangerous, most work in the study of religion/s corresponds to Merton’s above cited description of the empiricist extreme (“descriptive data or empirical generalizations which remain logically disparate and unconnected”). From my personal perspective, I don’t find this particularly problematic, as even descriptive data can be of great value and stand the test of time. In other words, for most practitioners in the study of religion/s who operate on the empiricist mode of improvised, ad hoc, bricolage, and isolated theorizing, treating theory as a smorgasbord of perspectives and tools that can be combined for specific needs, Merton’s middle-range theories are outside their reach. (For some exceptions, see below.)

It is tempting to classify theories of religion (as defined above) as general (or broad range) theories, but this is a misunderstanding. Following Merton, they should be considered as theories of the middle range. Merton credits middle-range theories with being abstract, even “sufficiently abstract to deal with differing spheres of social behavior and social structure” (Merton 1968, 68). We can call this criterion ‘scope of applicability’. Merton, it seems, sees a difference between middle-range and broad-range (general) theories in that the former address “differing spheres”, while the latter would address all spheres of social behavior and structure. This is why he sometimes uses the attribute “total” (Merton 1968, 46–48). Theories of religion do indeed aim at addressing differing

segments of social behavior and structure (as middle-range theories would), but typically not all (as broad range theories would). I know of no theory of religion that claims to be a total system of everything. But there certainly are such broad range (general) theories, and because of their broadness they are relevant for theories of religion, and they sometimes can be molded into theories of religion. Consider systems theory (Merton's foe) as developed by Niklas Luhmann, or rational choice theories. Recently, the Swiss sociologist Jörg Stolz has proposed a theory of "social games" (defined as "an entity created by players with resources who engage in action that is shaped by goals, rules, and representations, that involves objects, and that leads to game outcomes") as foundational for social life (Stolz 2023). This could lend itself to theorizing religious life. Stolz proposes a kind of theory that is total in the sense of being universal, meaning that its scope of applicability is not limited in space and time. To distinguish this from a general (broad range) theory, we can follow Stolz in calling this a grand (universal) theory.

Major faults that Merton found with broad range (general) theories are their explanatory undercomplexity or essentialism, and their remoteness from empirical studies. The former concern has been expressed by Raymond Boudon as follows:

it is hopeless and quixotic to try to determine the overarching independent variable that would operate in all social processes or to try to determine the overarching independent variable that would operate in all social processes or to determine the *essential* feature of the social structure, or to find out the two, three, or four couple of concepts (e.g., *Gesellschaft/Gemeinschaft*) that would be sufficient to analyze all social phenomena.

(Boudon 1991, 519 [*original emphasis*])

This kind of criticism would apply to Stolz's theory. Most critical readers from the study of religion/s, where the 'complexity' and 'variety' of religion are routinely emphasized, would at the outset dismiss any given theory of religion that seeks to account for, explain, or order religion by using one, two, three, or four causal factors ('independent variables') only.

The other concern is one of scale: broad range (general) theories are floating above the data and have no organic ties with empirical investigations. Theories of the middle range seek to resist the extremes of pure abstractions and raw empiricism; they avoid speculation on the one hand and description and "empirical generalization" (Merton 1968, 68) on the other. Middle-range theories lend themselves to "empirical testing" (39). While this is a rather narrow wording or criterion for the relationship between theory and data, to lose ties to empirical studies (where data is presented in a highly arbitrary, selective, uncritical, superficial, tendentious, biased manner) violates the criterion "having empirical support" in my proposed blueprint for theories of religion. Yet, even theories of religion that have only weak or problematic empirical support in their original

presentation can turn out to be extremely stimulating for empirical studies, and thereby have an important role to play in the research process. Some theories are testable, others are inspirational in the sense that they make us (re)think and (re)consider and they provide illuminating perspectives for empirical investigations. Provoking theories (see above) can make a greater impact than more balanced ones that have a better grounding in empirical materials or that have a greater degree of formal completeness.

Merton sometimes speaks of general theories, at other times of “total systems” (Merton 1968, 46), “total sociology” (46), “total sociological systems” (51), or “total systems of sociological theory” (51, 68). ‘Total’ is a loaded and polemic word. Total is bad. He writes: “Total sociological systems of theory ... represent general theoretical orientations” (68). This is vague but gives some indications. As an example, he refers to Marx’s historical materialism. We could also point to Freud as one of the few of these widely known big ideas super-theoreticians, whose thought and concepts are virtually omnipresent across various disciplines, including the study of religion/s; Freud even outlined a theory of religion (see, e.g., Hewitt 2014). Two more recent super-theoreticians who have also sketched theories of religion are Bourdieu and Derrida, while most others have not done so (even if they have written about a variety of religious or religion related matters); yet their ideas and concepts have been widely received also in religious studies (see, e.g., Deal and Beal 2004; Dresen, Gräß, and Weyel 2005; King 2017). In the present volume, however, we will only consider theories (and theorists) of religion.

(G)Theoretical ideas vs. a theory

The difference between theories and theoretical ideas is one of degree of elaboration. To qualify as a full-fledged theory, guiding assumptions and concepts need to be elaborated, unfolded, unpacked. Typically, this includes a discussion of alternative or rival accounts—be it in terms of exclusion or inclusion—and the grounding of one’s theory into broader contexts of theoretical approaches and theoretical genealogies. An evolutionary theory of religion, for instance, will need to situate itself in the family of evolutionary theories and argue for that choice. More than merely providing brief definitions, a theory will pay greater attention to key concepts, their genealogies, legacies, and background assumptions, and the connecting networks of related concepts. Moreover, while a theoretical idea can allude to empirical cases, or their relevance for empirical data can seem immediately relevant, from a full-fledged theory one expects a more extensive treatment and engagement with cases from the history of religions, be it an in-depth case study or a selection of examples. Theoretical ideas often revolve around proposals for a new definition of religion.

Here is an example of a definition-centered theoretical idea. Starting from the work of the anthropologist Talal Asad, namely, his critique of fellow anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion and Asad’s emphasis on

discourse (see below), the renowned historian of religions Bruce Lincoln has proposed a definition that aims (a) at avoiding the shortcoming of privileging “one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious” and that (b) allows for variation (Lincoln 2003, 5). His definition attends to four domains of religion that are, all taken together, “necessary parts of anything that can properly be called ‘a religion’” (Lincoln 2003, 7); these four domains are (1) specific types of discourse and related forms of (2) practice, (3) community, and (4) institutions (Lincoln 2003, 5–7). Note the ambition to single out something that can “properly” be called religion; while he embraces variation, fuzziness is to be avoided. Even though Lincoln refers to his definition as “polythetic and flexible” (Lincoln 2003, 5), technically speaking it is neither. For his definition seeks to establish unequivocal criteria for membership in the class of ‘proper’ religions. Whereas polythetic definitions think in terms of more-or-less, Lincoln thinks in terms of either-or; his definition is monothetic (Stausberg and Gardiner 2016, 1819; Schilbrack 2022). Moreover, even though he seeks to avoid the privileging of one domain, the first domain, defined as “A *discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status*” (Lincoln 2003, 5 [original emphasis]) is not only mentioned first, but stands out because it serves as the point of reference for the other three domains. Consider domains two and three:

A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected. ... 3. A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices.

(Lincoln 2003, 6 [original emphasis])

While a polythetic definition would allow for independence of the different defining features, Lincoln builds an edifice that rests on the specific feature of the special kind of discourse, namely transcendence. Where no reference occurs to such a discourse, there is no ‘religious’ practice or community. A beard grown without reference to such a discourse “reflects a strictly aesthetic preference” (Lincoln 2003, 6) and has nothing to with religion. The basic theoretical idea is that of transcendental discourse, a “capacity” to frame things so that they will be “received and regarded” as religious or sacred (Lincoln 2003, 6). Lincoln did not aspire to present a theory of religion, but the ambition with his definition, namely, (a) to get at the essence of what can ‘properly’ be called a religion, (b) to outline a minimum extension of religion (as the theoretical object) into four domains (“at a minimum” [Lincoln 2003, 5]) and (c) to point at their structural coherence, rather than being just an unconnected set of arbitrary features of a fuzzy object, could serve as the starting point for developing a fuller theory of religion.

A signature of Lincoln’s impressive work as a historian of religions is the enormous breadth of empirical cases that he has researched, mainly using a

philological method on primary sources. His definition builds something like a conceptual canopy or umbrella for his work as a historian of religions. A different approach can be found in the work of Asad. While Asad denied the validity of the type of definition of religion as presented by Lincoln some of his essays dealing with particular cases or fields of scholarship have resonated widely in the theoretical discourse in religious studies and even though Asad never presented these ideas as constitutive features of religion per se, they have often been received as such. For example, in essays on European Mediaeval Christianity, in particular monasticism, Asad emphasized the role of the training of the body, disciplinary programs, and technologies of the self (Asad 1993). In another essay on the anthropology of Islam, Asad writes:

If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith.

(Asad 2009, 20)

This statement builds on a textualist model of Islam. This kind of naïve scripturalism has largely been overcome in the history of religions. Moreover, note Asad's premise that his conception of Islam as 'a discursive tradition' takes native perspectives as its starting point and thereby privileges one alleged insider perspective to speak not only for Islam as such but also as key to an anthropological study of a religion. Most historians of religion would find this procedure questionable. Despite these methodological shortcomings, Asad's idea has had an overwhelming impact, witness Lincoln's emphasis on discourse (even though he does not buy Asad's insistence on 'tradition'). Such a theoretical program could easily be put to work to conceptualize any religion as a discursive tradition, analogous to Asad's claim for Islam.

What kind of questions can theories of religion be expected to address?

In a previous publication, I outlined four main questions typically addressed by theories of religion (Stausberg 2009, 3–6). In a subsequent chapter, co-authored with Steven Engler, this list was extended to the following five interrelated questions (Stausberg and Engler 2016, 56):

what kind of subject matter does religion constitute? what is the structure of religion? what is distinctive/specific about religion? what are the origins of religion? what work does religion do (effects, functions, or products)?

As the above discussion has shown—using the example of ritual theory—different meanings of theory will also result in significant differences in how these questions are posed, addressed, and answered. Not all theories of religion address each of the

five questions to the same extent. In the following, I will revisit these guiding questions, not with a view to identifying correct answers, but to reflect on the range of alternatives metatheoretical takes on each of them.

(1)Ontology

“I think ... that religion is a real, distinctive, and enduring part of human life, and that we can describe its nature in specific terms.”

(Smith 2017, 21)

Religion “is a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the biological real”.

(Flood 2019, 4)

The philosophical term ‘ontology’ means the study of the kind or nature of being. This question is fundamental for theories of religion as it addresses religion’s mode of existence. This seemingly simple question harbors a range of sub-questions, and there are various ways to address it. Space permits to scratch the surface of only some of these here.

In the study of religion/s, the debate on ontology was stimulated by three much-cited sentences by another Chicago historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith, uttered in the introduction to one of his collections of essays:

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytical purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.

(Smith 1982, xi)

These sentences can and have been interpreted in different ways. Matters of exegesis apart, his statement has lastingly challenged the hitherto prevailing naïve or uncritical certitude that religion has an independent existence beyond scholarly language games. One way of reading this passage is to frame it as a contribution to a debate on realism. Realism is the assumption that certain things—in our case an entity commonly called religion—exist beyond our language and perception. The opposing position is antirealism. Both ontological realism and ontological antirealism come in different forms. (I will not discuss epistemological and semantic realism vs. antirealism here.) For ontological realism in theories of religion, we can distinguish between metaphysical, social, and conceptual realisms. Metaphysical realism in theory of religion would claim that religion (in one way or another) expresses some kind of metaphysical (ideational, supernatural, or transcendent) reality, a reality behind, above, or underlying the world as we experience it empirically. Social realism in theory of religion can mean that social things like institutions or practices—both generally considered cornerstones of religions—even though they are produced by

human beings (and non-human actants) are experienced by humans as objective realities and thereby count as real. Conceptual realism in theory of religion would admit that even though our conceptual apparatus is always contingent, and that the category of religion must be criticized it can still be considered a reality beyond our inadequate conceptualizations and theoretizations of it; an influential form of conceptual realism is called critical realism (e.g., Schilbrack 2017a; 2017b; for problems with the program of critical realism, see Stausberg 2021).

Antirealism in theories of religion also comes in different forms. Here I propose distinguishing between conceptualism, fictionalism, and nominalism. Conceptualism means that religion merely is an abstraction, a concept, or a category that does not correspond to, refer to, or express an extra-linguistic reality, but can still be a meaningful construct in communication such as in politics or scholarship. Fictionalism is a stronger version of conceptualism; in theory of religion, it can come in two forms. Eliminative fictionalism is the debunking variety, whereby a concept such as religion is held not only not to lack any ties to an-extralinguistic reality but that such a concept is utterly misleading and therefore should be abandoned or banned. In pragmatic fictionalism, one admits that a concept like religion lacks ties to an-extralinguistic reality, but one nevertheless allows for the use of the term as potentially useful for academic work; in religious studies, this view often figures under the call to consider religion an ‘analytical category’, a position that can also be embraced by conceptualists. Pragmatic fictionalism differs from conceptualism in that the latter hesitates to dismiss religion as merely fiction. The third variety of antirealism is nominalism. In our case, this means the rejection of what philosophers call ‘universals’; this covers ideas or other mental constructs, names, or other linguistic constructs. A feature of ‘universals’ is that they are ‘instantiated’. A classical example is whiteness; as a ‘universal’, whiteness is ‘instantiated’ in things we perceive as white. Nominalists reject the claim that ‘whiteness’ exists outside or beyond such instantiations. They treat taxonomic entities in the same manner; nominalists would hold that speaking of humanity makes no sense, and what counts are instantiations, namely, humans. For theorists of religion, that would mean that nominalists would allow for instantiations of religion, or a religion (like Islam), but reject the universal (religion).

Since Smith’s enigmatic statement in 1982, the realism-antirealism debate has gained some prominence in the study of religion/s. But ontology also covers other relevant issues and commitments, which have been prominent in at least some theories of religion. For instance, under the impact of cognitive and evolutionary approaches since the 1990s, the issue of naturalism has attracted attention; for many scholars from these quarters, naturalism has been a matter of programmatic self-identification, typically in attempts to ally the study of religion/s more closely with (natural) science, and to adopt ‘scientific’ methods like experiments. In a foundational sense of opposition to supernaturalism (which it shares with one sense of the concept ‘secularism’), naturalism means

the epistemological and methodological exclusion of supernatural causation from academic accounts. (For methodological naturalism see, e.g., Blum 2018; Franek 2020.) For the study of religion/s, this served as tactic of emancipating itself from theology, which explicitly or implicitly accept revelation as an ultimate (supernatural) cause for the emergence of the religious traditions they study and endorse (albeit critically). Yet, on closer inspection there are various interpretations of naturalism. It can range from strict physicalism to positions that take interpretation into account and that accommodate mental factors and cultural traits as causal factors (where culture is not understood as the opposite of nature, but as a natural albeit interpretative phenomenon). Some authors refer to naturalism as a worldview, or a philosophy of science, while the corresponding ontological position is called materialism. This, of course, again comes in different varieties. Positions such as reductive materialism, physicalism, or deterministic materialism would hardly work as basis for theories of religion. More promising starting points for theories of religion are naturalist dualism (that there are features of the world such as consciousness that cannot be fully explained by physical processes), non-reductive materialism (that non-physical features of the world are ultimately of physical substance, but their working cannot be explained by physics), or emergentism (that non-physical features derive from physical ones as a distinct level). Sometimes, in theories of religion these kinds of commitments are boiled down to what other might consider self-evident choices; Manuel Vásquez, for example, propagates non-reductive materialism, but explains the meaning of his materialist commitment in the following terms: “I call this framework materialist because it approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels” (Vásquez 2011, 5).

(2) Specificity (*distinctiveness*)

This is the question that is typically addressed by definitions of religion. Many definitions aim at establishing rules for class-membership by pointing at boundary conditions. In the case of Lincoln, we have seen the distinction he draws between the religious and the aesthetic. The theoretical criterion for specificity—in Lincoln’s case (a) the reference to a kind of discourse and (b) the specific features of this discourse—is what makes religion different from other ‘constructs’, ‘domains’, ‘fields’, ‘realms’, ‘systems’, or ‘worldviews’, to use some of the metaphors for the sort of (biological, cultural, human, natural, social) class that religion is categorized into. Recurrent candidates for specificity are notions like the holy, the sacred, the transcendent, the special, the supernatural, and the superhuman. Definitions and theories of religion typically put one such notion, and one such feature, central stage; but there could also be a pattern or a cluster of several central features (e.g., for a homeostatic property cluster definition of religion, see Stausberg and Gardiner 2016, 20–22). Another perspective is to focus not so much on specific referents, but on the degrees of relating to these (e.g., ‘absolute’ vs. relative values, ‘ultimate’ vs. day-to-day reality, the ‘really real’ vs. the ordinary real).

Searching for specificity or distinctiveness of religion is often regarded with suspicion in the study of religion/s. Dirty words in our vocabulary are ‘*sui generis*’ or ‘essentialism’. Both are deemed inappropriate approaches to theory; *sui generis* theorizing claims an epistemological, ontological, or semantic exceptionality of religion and its study, ‘essentialism’ assumes religion’s immunity to historical change, cross-cultural variability, and morphological complexity. Both positions are considered outdated.

(3)Origins/emergence and genealogy

The question of origin is to be distinguished from that of beginnings. The latter issue is temporal and historical, the former synchronic and structural. At issue with the former understanding of the word is not the point of time to which signs of whatever is potentially identified as religion can first be traced (in human evolution and history), but the causal factors, affordances, structures, or mechanisms that result in the recurrent emergence of religion throughout human history.

Most theories of religion are grounded in assumptions and views on human nature. Addressing the views on human beings—or life in general (Flood 2019)—are therefore a useful metatheoretical vantage point to discuss theories of religion. Views of human nature that stipulate certain ‘needs’ to which religion (however specified) would provide the ‘answer’, explain the origin of religion in this case, the origin can overlap with the functionality of religion (see below).

A rivaling or complementary metatheoretical concept to origins is that of genealogy. On one interpretation (see Bevir 2008), this approach has grown out of radical historicism, a philosophy that rejected ideas of necessity, teleology, and unity of history. Genealogy eschews essentialism, universalisms and truth claims that deny their own historicity; instead, it points to contingencies, discontinuities, and transformations. Genealogy is fundamentally critical because its ambition is denaturalization; this means that things (like concepts, institutions, practices, traditions) that have previously been considered as natural, as the way things have always been, as being part of the cosmic or natural order, are unmasked as having been created under specific circumstances and for specific interests. This kind of genealogy finds all interpretations of religion’s origins suspicious and would instead focus on the historical development of religions or the idea or concept of religion.

A broader account reads genealogy as a narrative that seeks to explain how a phenomenon did, or could have, come about. This opens for conjectural or counterfactual accounts, elucidating the phenomenon “by *imagining* how and why it could or could not have developed” (Queloz 2022, 435). Contrary to genealogical denaturalization, genealogy can also seek to naturalize a phenomenon. Naturalization here has a different meaning, namely, to bring something lofty down to earth; this is another kind of debunking. Writes Queloz:

A recurrent pattern then emerges: the *explanandum* is typically something highly respected, valued, refined, and exalted, perhaps even something seemingly transcendent or god-like, but at the very least something that looks like a prerogative of human beings—these are the things most likely to call for genealogical explanation, after all. The *explanans*, by contrast, is typically something less mysterious, but also less respected and valued: something ordinary, mundane, and firmly immanent—something *all too* human, perhaps, or else something we share with other animals.

(Queloz 2022, 438)

This “all too human” includes human causes like the will to power, reproduction or survival, self-interest, or basic features of human cognition like classification, ascribing causality to personal agents, constructing meaning and thinking in a teleological framework. Queloz distinguishes between reductive and non-reductive genealogies. The reductive version debunks the higher-level unit, the explanandum (e.g., religion) as nothing but another version of the lower-level traits, where the higher unit merely masquerades as something noble. Something based on a projection remains a projection, albeit a seemingly noble one. The non-reductive genealogy treats the higher-level unit as distinct from the lower, even though the lower-level (and less noble) traits account for its emergence and persistence—they explain it, but do not explain it away; the latter would amount to the genetic fallacy (where the conclusion is dismissed because of the origin of the claim, or the person making the claim). Both versions, even though apparently having conflicting agendas, can be combined in theorizing (Queloz 2022, 438–441). While genealogy is often considered as primarily deconstructive (or negative), it can also be vindicative (or positive). This largely depends on the moral qualities of the lower-level explaining factors and the explanandum. If sinister will to power of elites are assumed as explanans (similar to conspiracy narratives), then the resulting picture is perceived as negative; if more morally innocent features are the driving forces, then something can also appear as ‘natural’, meaningful, or inducing cooperation, well-being, flourishing, or fitness. This reflects the moral status of the explanandum, religion as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

(4) Configurations (structure) and assemblages

The term ‘configurations’ is used instead of structures (as in Stausberg 2009, 4; Stausberg and Engler 2016, 58–60) to avoid any allusion to structuralism. While structuralism (on one reading) assumes ahistoric universals underlying mental patterns that structure culture and society, configurations are an aggregation of features to form an apparent unity. For example, Lincoln’s definition of religion cited above makes an implicit claim regarding the configuration of religion, where he speaks of four “domains”, namely, discourse, practices, community, and institutions (Lincoln 2003, 5–7). Lincoln regards this as a kind of minimum; so, maybe there are other domains. Taking the step from offering a definition to

constructing a theory would require a fuller discussion of the questions—among others—why just these four “domains” are the most prominent (or typical) ones, how they are interrelated (in Lincoln’s definition, as we have seen, discourse feeds the other three), why/if all of them are necessary, and how more precisely they work. Other metaphors commonly used for the parts of a structure, or the elements in a constellation, in theory of religion include ‘aspects’, ‘building blocks’, ‘components’, ‘dimensions’, ‘elements’, or ‘parts’. To address configurations, forms, or structures, various sciences use the term ‘morphology’; biologists also speak of ‘anatomy’ (often with a greater focus on internal structures and the use of invasive techniques). Both words have also been employed in the study of religion/s, mostly in textbooks written by protagonists of phenomenological approaches (Tiele 1899; Eliade 1958; Smart 1996).

We can distinguish between a holistic and a reductionist approach to configurations. While the reductionist approach seeks to break down or reverse engineer configurations into building blocks, components, or elements, the holistic approach attends to mutual interaction, interplay, and integration between the different aspects, dimensions, or parts as they merge into more complex systems. The reductive version looks at religion as if it were a piece of architecture, the holistic view as if it were a sort of ecology.

In recent years, the concept of *agencement* (‘arrangement’; ‘layout’; ‘ordering’, ‘putting together’) introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) has become popularized in English as ‘assemblage’. In combination with theoretical approaches such as Actor Network Theories and New Materialism, this has drifted into of a theoretical tendency that attempts to think constellations as dynamic and fluid processes of interaction between heterogeneous (human and non-human) elements that do not form a stable unity but remain in a fluid field of ordering. Yet, as observed by Ian Buchanan (2020), the meaning of the concept has shifted since it was originally launched. Key elements of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage-thinking, according to Wise (2011), are a shift from being and structure to becoming and multiplicity, from complexities to events, a creation of ‘territories’ that are at the same time being unmade (‘reterritorializing’ and ‘deterritorializing’), a bringing together of the natural and the artificial, things, actions, passions and signs, discourses, humans and non-humans. (This resonates with the enacting type of theory.) The concept is related to Deleuze and Guattari’s telling (yet vague) metaphor of Body without Organs (taken from Antonin Artaud). Assemblages are constellations that do things. This metaphor indicates the departure from thinking in terms of functions, for which organs are the classical example. (Among the theories discussed in the present volume, the one proposed by Tremlett [2020] draws on the notion of assemblage.)

(5)Outcome (effects) and functions

Speaking of functions of religion resonates with the question of constellations; for while the assumed components of religion relate to religion as the

overarching unit, functionalist thinking relates religion to other units of analysis, such as society or the human psyche. Psychologists of religion have produced research that shows positive effects of religiousness on, among other things, people's mental and physical health and happiness. Even if we set aside questions concerning the reliability and the validity of the underlying research methodology and data, religion can have some (measurable) consequences. Yet, such potential effects or outcomes need to be distinguished from stipulating that promoting human health or happiness are a function of religion. Function is a matter of systemic fit, of design, or even teleology. But has religion really taken shape, has it been designed by historical or evolutionary forces to (consistently and recurrently) produce this outcome (e.g., better health and more happiness)? Or are these merely benign side-effects? Consider a prototypical biological example of functional thinking: pumping blood and rhythmic beating are two effects of the operations of the heart, but only the first of these is a function, whereas the second is a side-effect. While this function of the heart can be established by means of anatomical, physiological, and experimental evidence, evidence for a potential function of religion for individual psychology or human culture and society is much more challenging to establish, if that at all is possible. The function of specialized and professionalized societal systems such as formal education, law, or medicine for which a clearer set of purposes can be stipulated (or so it seems at first sight) appear more evident than those of religion, music, or the arts.

The standard example of the heart suggests that functions can have an observer-independent existence; we could call this functionalist realism. But in philosophy of science, we also find positions that speak of functions as ascriptions, as dependent on our analyses of the world. In a classical article, Robert Cummins emphasizes that functional analysis amounts to the ascription of a capacity to something and that this ascription occurs as part of an analysis of some system (Cummins 1975; see Segal 2010 for an account of functionalism in theory of religion inspired by Cummins). Functionalism means that function is the guiding analytical and theoretical perspective. A functionalist theory of religion would seek to explain religion mainly in terms of its function; most famously such a theoretical program has been expressed by Malinowski in his entry "Social Anthropology" in the 14th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1929) where he famously stated that functionalist theory is a "type of theory [that] aims at the explanation of anthropological facts at all levels of development by their function". But one does not need to be a functionalist to discuss potential outcomes of religion. Other forms of theorizing can reflect on consequences of religion without assigning them a primary causal role. (Among the theories discussed in the present volume, the one proposed by David Sloan Wilson [2002] is functionalist.)

In 1949, the already mentioned sociologist Robert Merton introduced the distinction between "manifest and latent functions". Merton is not very clear on the intended meaning of this distinction. At one point, he provides the

following definition: “conscious *motivations* of social behavior vs. its *objective consequences*” (Merton 1968, 114). This implies two sets of distinctions: between motivations and consequences, and between conscious, intentional, subjective factors and the objective outcome of actions. And here is a more complicated wording:

the first [= manifest functions] referring to those objective consequences for a specified unit (person, subgroup, social or cultural system) which contribute to its adjustment or adaptation and were so intended; the second [= latent functions] referring to unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order.

(Merton 1968, 117)

The cited formulations are somewhat in tension to each other: the first distinction is based on [manifest] motivations vs. [latent] consequences, but the second subsumes consequences also under manifest functions; here the criterion of distinction is intention (intended vs. unintended) and potentially also recognition (which however remains somewhat obscure). For rituals, an example could be that a communal liturgy is performed with the deliberate public intention to produce rain or to express praise and worship to a deity (the manifest functions), while its objective consequence is that it brings people together and thereby creates in-group interactions and maybe increases cooperation (the latent function). The distinction between manifest and latent functions resonates with insider vs. outsider ascriptions, or with common-sense vs. sociological forms of interpretation (see Campbell 1982 for a critical discussion).

While it is tempting to call a consequence a function, the two need to be kept conceptually apart. Not every consequence, effect, outcome, performance, product, role, or result of religion is necessarily a function of religion. Ascribing functionality implies that the respective outcome is not merely symptomatic or accidental but reflects a recurrent mechanism that assumes that religion is designed to fulfill the respective role. To say that it is a function of religion to provide legitimacy to rulers (e.g., kings) is a much stronger statement than saying that providing legitimacy to rulers is a typical effect of what religion does in society. Claiming functionality comes close to stipulating something like a social law. This is also why functionalist theorizing is often criticized for (among other things) being overly deterministic and static, and for ignoring the complexity/multiplicity of social phenomena.

The heart, to return to the classical example, has one main function, namely, pumping blood through the body. Yet, the heart also does other things, such as (among others) maintaining blood pressure, regulating blood flow, or thermoregulation. While the heart fulfils these roles simultaneously, there are other organs that have acquired different functions throughout evolutionary history (Diamond 2012, 334–336). Similarly, we can speculate that there is not only one, but a set of functions of religion, which can change in history—some

gaining and others losing importance—and which can vary in different forms of society. The American polymath Jared Diamond goes so far as to stipulate seven functions of religion, not all of which were present at all stages of religious history; these are: (1) supernatural explanation; (2) defusing anxiety through ritual; (3) providing comfort about pains and death; (4) standardized organization; (5) preaching political obedience; (6) moral codes of behavior towards strangers; (7) justification of wars (Diamond 2012, 344–368). Whether this list is compelling, and whether these outcomes are a matter of functional design, is up for discussion, but the suggestion to theorize a multitude of functions rather than one main or single function is attractive. Another strategy of differentiation pertains to different social levels: religion can potentially have different functions for individuals (micro-level), groups (meso-level), or societies (macro-level).

Theories of religion in the study of religion/s

The study of religion/s has a pre-theoretical relationship to its subject matter, religion. In this respect, it is like disciplines such as art history, history, or musicology. Like in the study of religion/s, scholars from these disciplines do not build their careers on theories of art/history/music. A philosopher attempting to work on theory of art, history, music, or religion respectively would probably stand a better chance to get a job in a philosophy department than a theoretician from art history, history, music, or the study of religion/s in departments where these disciplines are taught. Jobs advertised in the study of religion/s with the word ‘theory’ in the title are exceedingly rare (with queer theory or postcolonial theory standing the best chances), nor is ‘theory of religion’ a recognized sub-field in the discipline. For instance, while there are dozens of specialized journals on all sorts of sub-fields of religious studies (for their development see Stausberg 2016), there is none with a focus on theory of religion. The one whose title might point into this direction—*Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (MTSR)—describes its aims as follows (website assessed January 24, 2024): it is “dedicated to historical, critical, and social scientific approaches to the study of religion, as well as a relentlessly reflexive critique of the theories, methods, and categories used in such study.” So, its focus is on various “approaches”; critique of theories is only one of its points of interest. Yet, MTSR has not offered a coherent critical debate of the theories presented and discussed in the present volume.

Scholars in all the above-mentioned disciplines share certain working understandings of what they are studying, and the range of matters they are studying keeps on extending. In history, for example, the political and public uses of historical narratives and knowledge has emerged as a major branch of scholarship. Likewise, scholars of religion have in recent decades explored a variety of themes and topics that our predecessors a generation before had not envisioned. This has posed the question of boundaries: Is this (really) art? Is this (really)

music? Is this (really) religion? This issue has often been dealt with as a matter of definition (see Lincoln above on ‘proper’ religion). At the same time, in all the above-mentioned disciplines, recent decades have witnessed a loss of certainty regarding their discipline-foundational concepts: even if scholars share a certain working knowledge, in the study of religion/s, ‘religion’ is widely recognized as a disputed and deeply problematic concept. Accordingly, there has been a series of calls to abandon the concept altogether; yet, even though the suggested alternatives could seem less problematic in some respects, they are problematic in others. Similar debates and concerns have been viral concerning ‘art’ and ‘music’. Yet, even though scholars working in these disciplines must have an understanding of their subject matter (religion, history, music, art) and whereas debates rage whether something can qualify as ‘art’ or ‘music’ (and thereby is a legitimate thing to study) or whether ‘art’, ‘music’, and ‘religion’ are meaningful concepts and useful categories at all, *theories* of art, history, or music tend to be mostly (but not exclusively) produced by scholars from other disciplines, such as philosophers, evolutionary psychologists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, culture theorists, critics, etc. Nevertheless, there are scholars from these disciplines who have also produced theories of art, history, music, and religion respectively, but they are not the majority, and their theories do not necessarily get most attention in the broader academic world. In the case of the theories discussed in this volume, seven were produced by professional scholars of religion (Bush, Flood, Krech, Levy, Riesebrodt, Tremlett, Tweed).³ If we take citations as recorded by Google Scholar as indicative of broader reception, their theories have been cited considerably less than those by some of the other works discussed in this volume. Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling* has been by far the most successful one in bibliometric terms. Yet, none of the seven books written by scholars of religion/s are among the top cited works. This brings home the point that even though there are specialized traditions of academic knowledge production dedicated to art, history, music, and religion/s, these subjects are not ‘owned’ by any single academic discipline; even though scholars from these disciplines may know more about specific things in these subject matters, they have no exclusive or hegemonic discursive position. At the same time, if the study of religion/s as an academic discipline wants to make the claim of being in professional charge of religion—and thereby stand up to the public demand to get a better grasp of this elusive and often controversial phenomenon—rather than passing this call on to others (theologians, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, etc.) and positioning itself merely as a reservoir of expertise on a heterogeneous variety of religious matters and religions, then it should engage actively with the contemporary state of affairs in theories of religion. In many introductory courses, so-called classical theories of religion—covering a period of intellectual history from, roughly, the 1840s to the 1960s—are dealt with precisely for this reason, to get students to think about religion in general terms, before or while at the same time to expose them to outlines on religious history or a wide variety of different religions. So, the need for

theories of religion is acknowledged implicitly, but does not guide research practice. From where most scholars stand, theories of religion seem very far away, if not altogether a pipe dream. In an earlier publication, we referred to theories of religion as a regulative idea (Stausberg and Engler 2016, 68), meaning that they are necessary goals that at the same time can never be achieved in a satisfactory manner.

In daily research activities, most scholars are involved in specialist research. One does not turn to theories of religion to get an overview of knowledge in the field; for that, there are now many handbooks. But theories, even if one does not adopt them in the sense of an intellectual conversion, provide categories, concepts, ideas, perspectives, metaphors, narratives, questions, and typologies that can challenge assumptions taken for granted and inform or inspire new research. Among the theories discussed in the present volume, the work by Smith has an appendix in which the author proposes research questions that could inform empirical research (Smith 2017, 263–273).

Above I have referred to a working (implicit) understanding of religion among scholars of religion/s. I have no solid empirical evidence on what this working notion of religion entails, but my impression is that many scholars of religion/s would agree, minimally, that ‘religion’ is a Western notion that only with great difficulty and risk can be employed in the study of other cultures; that religion means different things in different cultural, historical, and social contexts; that religion is a complex, multidimensional, heterogeneous, and mutable phenomenon (if it at all is proper to call it *a* ‘phenomenon’); that religion has fluid boundaries; that religion is important in a wide range of individual, cultural, and social contexts (from individual experiences or habits to world politics). At first sight, this seems like an efficient recipe to dismiss all attempts at creating theories of religion, because they all can be easily criticized for insufficiently reflecting the complex, contextual, fluid, heterogeneous, mutable shape of religion and the questionable Western legacies responsible for its naturalization as a seemingly stable object. Yet, these working assumptions could also be turned into starting points for creating a novel theory of religion.

Limitations

Even a superficial look at the table of content of this volume will reveal a double gender bias: (a) this book does not discuss any book written by female theorists; (b) few of the contributors are female. For the latter, the selection bias is not mine alone. For the record, I have approached at least one female colleague for most of the chapters, but most of requests were turned down. This outcome may be due to chance or the nature of my academic network. More interesting is the question of the potential gender bias in the selection of the works discussed here. From the table of contents of the present volume, it could seem that all theorists of religion—*theorists of religion producing theories of religion as defined in this chapter*—are

male. This seems hard to believe and is obviously not quite true. Yet, for the period discussed in this volume (the twenty-first century), I think I have left no book out that gives a theory of religion (as defined in this text) authored by a female theorist. I agree that my criteria for the class of works in theory of religion can appear as rather narrow (for the sake of clarity), but I must leave it to others to scrutinize whether there is a potential hidden male agenda in my approach. In this observed gender bias, theories of religion are an outlier in religious studies otherwise, where female voices have long since gained prominence. There are also important female theoreticians in the study of religion/s. Consider, for example, the theoretically ambitious work done by Catherine Bell on ritual theory (see above), by Kim Knott on space and religion (2005), by Ann Taves on religious experience (2009) and religious events (2016), by Birgit Meyer on religion and sensational forms (2015). Their work, and that of others, substantially contributes to theoretical approaches and theoretical ideas (in the terminology proposed above) but does not fall in the class of theories of religion. There is, of course, no natural law that prevents female (or LGBT+) scholars from proposing new theories of religion, as has occasionally happened in the past; in fact, any such book might already be in print just as I am writing these lines.

Yet, as extreme as this gender bias may appear, from a cross-disciplinary perspective it is not at all that exceptional. For, if one looks at related disciplines or fields of scholarship that practice similar discursive styles as theories of religion, one finds similar gender imbalances (if we disregard gender theories and feminism). Take sociology as a telling example. Consider a recently published co-authored book entitled *Modern Sociologists on Society and Religion* (Furseth and Repstad, 2022) that, as the publisher's description puts it, "provides an introduction to some of the most influential figures in contemporary social theory with an emphasis on their analyses of society and religion". Among the ten sociologists discussed in this book, two are women (namely, Arlie Hochschild and Patricia Collins). An edited volume that reviews 71 keywords in sociology of religion (Gärtner and Pickel, 2019) arrives at a similar percentage. For the period from 1966 to 2015 (when the number of women in academia massively grew), it discusses 45 works. Out of these, six were written by female scholars (namely, Mary Douglas, Fatima Mernissi, Eileen Barker, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Nilüfer Göle, and Grace Davie), and two had female co-authors (Pippa Norris, Linda Woodhead). Similarly, the prestigious journal *Theory, Culture & Society* on its website publishes a list of "leading social and cultural theorists". This listing of "Key Theorists"⁴ comprises 34 names, thereof five women (Judith Butler, Bracha Ettinger, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, and Luce Irigaray).⁵ Turning to history, while there is a plethora of prominent female historians, discussion on the field of theory (or philosophy) of history appears to be dominated by male scholars (e.g., Frank Ankersmit, Dipesh Chakrabarty, François Hartog, Antonios Liakos, Jörn Rüsen, Hayden White). In sum, while this may amount to anecdotal evidence, rather than objective facts, the tendency is clear: even though the

humanities and social sciences are much less male dominated than several decades ago, the realm of ‘bigger’ theory still is.⁶ I expect and hope for this to change in the next generation of scholars.

Not only are all books discussed in this volume written by men, but they are also all Western scholars. North America and Western Europe “are the regions where the heavy lifting of theoretization has tended to take place” (Alles 2024, 51). There is no doubt that scholars and thinkers from the Global South, from the Middle East, and from Asia have important things to say on matters of religion, just as religious thinkers from the West. Yet, this is not a book of world philosophy nor on indigenous, emic, religious thinking on religious issues, but a critical review of theories of religion advanced by scholars working in the academic world and its yet limited range of diversities. I hope that reading this volume will result in scholars from more diverse parts of the world engaging in the debate.

Notes

- 1 In the study of religion/s one can think of Lawson and McCauley, Wiebe and Martin, Gilhus and Mikaelsson, Mellor and Shilling, Engler and Gardiner. This list only mentions pairs that have co-authored consistently, not merely one publication (like Hubert and Mauss). An exceptional figure was Rodney Stark who co-authored theories of religion with two different co-authors (William Bainbridge and Roger Finke respectively).
- 2 An exception that proves the rule is the theory of religion book by Turner, Maryanski, Petersen and Geertz (2018); that quartet is the combination of two duos (Turner and Maryanski have published a lot together, Petersen and Geertz are close colleagues).
- 3 Krech and Riesebrodt received their doctorates in sociology.
- 4 Key Theorists—Theory, Culture & Society | Global Public Life (theoryculturesociety.org) [accessed January 17, 2024].
- 5 This list and the previously mentioned edited volume give much higher percentages (of around 13–15%) than Korom’s study of American elite sociologists, who finds less than 5% female sociologists; from 1970 to 2010 there was only a slight decrease in male dominance from 97.7 to 93.5% (Korom 2019, 17).
- 6 As noted by Korom (2019, 21) for elite sociology: “Clearly, additional research is needed to explain why women are underrepresented in the highest prestige strata of the discipline.” It is tempting to speculate whether this situation may resonate with findings in psychological research on the “male hubris, female humility effect” (Reilly, Neumann, and Andrews 2022), gender differences in risk aversion/risk taking (e.g., Friedl, Ponderfer, and Schmidt 2020) and similar gender differences observed in Western culture.

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