



## Prospects in Theories of Religion\*

**Michael Stausberg**

Guest Editor

Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion,  
University of Bergen, Norway  
Michael.Stausberg@ahkr.uib.no

---

### Abstract

The article proposes possible reasons for the avoidance of theories of religion in the discipline of religious studies. The article further discusses some main challenges for theories of religion: the complexity of the subject matter, the variety of discourses in other relevant scholarly fields and disciplines, and the various (philosophical, anthropological etc.) choices theorists have to make (and sometimes made without further reflection). These challenges are illustrated by introducing the articles of this special issue on *Prospects in Theories of Religion*. The introductory article points to some shared concerns and developments but also to some points of potential dialogue and matters of contention among the articles of this special issue.

### Keywords

theories of religion, complexity

### The Avoidance of Theories of Religion among Scholars of Religion

The study of religion\ is an academic enterprise identified by its subject matter: religion\ s. Whatever we study, it has to somehow deal with religion\ s. This makes the study of religion\ s similar to political sciences or cultural studies, but different from social sciences such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology where inquiry is not driven by topics as long as research proceeds in accordance with the standards applicable to these respective disciplines. With some notable exceptions, most scholars who hold a position in religious studies departments employ empirical approaches in their research; in other words, by engaging some kind of acknowledged research methodologies, we study

---

\* I would like to thank Steven Engler and Joseph Bulbulia for corrections and insightful comments to a previous draft.

some religion\’s or something we consider religious. When it comes to sets of propositions on the very subject matter of our study—i.e. what is generally regarded as theories of religion—the field carries with itself an ambivalent legacy of avoiding and importing theories. None of the scholars who are generally credited with being founders of the discipline (Max Müller, et al.) did so by advocating an explicit theory religion. Theories of religion, it seems, were something one either tried to desist or something the field adopted from another (e.g. anthropology and sociology), with some of the latter theories attaining canonical status. With the exception of Mircea Eliade, none of the eight theoreticians of religion included in the widely used textbook by Daniel Pals (2006) was trained in or worked in a religious studies department. Yet, even though they originated in quite different academic contexts and traditions, these theories are often transmitted, in teaching, as classical, i.e., as relevant, theories within religious studies. Turning to the contemporary scene, the situation remains substantially unchanged. While there is an unprecedented abundance of theories available on the theoretical marketplace—seventeen contemporary theories are discussed in Stausberg (ed.) 2009—very few of them have emerged from religious studies contexts—Tweed (2006), Riesebrodt (2007), and partly Lawson/McCauley (1990) being exceptions that confirm the rule.

At present, I can see four main reasons for this reluctance of scholars of religion to engage with theories of religion. First, theory is usually not emphasized in religious studies programs,<sup>1</sup> nor is theory regarded as a common and promising entry port to an academic career, except for positions in the philosophy of religion, a subfield of religious studies, philosophy, and theology which in many universities is not located in religious studies departments.<sup>2</sup> Second, many scholars of religion\’s may well feel that the very term ‘religion’ is far too remote and detached from their day-to-day work to be perceived as engaging. In a similar manner, historians and social scientists tend to leave questions such as ‘what is history’ and ‘what is society’ to philosophers. Third, scholars working with empirical methods often struggle to come to terms with the complexity of the phenomena (see also below). The necessary reduction of complexity and messiness of reality that is presupposed and achieved when

---

<sup>1</sup> This argument is to some extent circular, leaving unclear what is cause and what is effect (a typical causality dilemma).

<sup>2</sup> Note that some prominent protagonists of religious studies also teach substantially in the philosophy of religion. From the contributors to *Contemporary Theories of Religion* consider Don Wiebe and Matthew Day. The courses taught by Wiebe at the Toronto School of Theology include Philosophical Theology (Modern and Contemporary); Philosophy of Religion (Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary); History of Philosophy in Relation to Christian Thought. At Florida State University Tallahassee, Department for Religion, Day currently (summer 2010) teaches a Philosophy of Religion course.

constructing theories of religion—their necessary detachment from given specific contexts and concrete human beings—can therefore easily be perceived to be irrelevant for the kind of work one typically is engaged in addition to being distorting and “reductionist”. From this point of view, attempting to outline a theory of religion can appear to be both naive and inappropriate.<sup>3</sup> Last but not least, certain intellectual developments of the past decades, loosely connected to postmodernism or similar labels, have contributed to raise suspicions both about the very project of theory and the concept of ‘religion’ as the subject area of potential theories of religion (see Stausberg 2009a: 12-14).

In a previous edited volume (Stausberg (ed.) 2009), a group of scholars mainly from religious studies backgrounds<sup>4</sup> have made an attempt to account for the theoretical landscape as it has been unfolding during the past two decades.<sup>5</sup> While the task in that publication was a stock-taking of the contemporary theoretical landscape in the form of a presentation and a discussion of seventeen theories, where (except for critical and/or sympathetic assessment) the voices of the commentators necessarily receded somewhat into the background, in the present special issue the same group of authors<sup>6</sup> seek to continue and advance the debate by highlighting what they regard as crucial issues for theories of religion.<sup>7</sup>

### **Theoretical Integration**

The hope of establishing a comprehensive theory of religion appears to be doomed to failure not only because of the complexity of religion, which it shares with other cultural/social and biological phenomena, but also because of two other challenges: theoretical integration in an inter- or transdisciplinary sense and the integrated nature of religion as a cultural phenomenon.

---

<sup>3</sup> From a philosophy of science point of view the epistemic implications of this position have been articulated succinctly by Day (2007: 63): “...an explanatory theory of religion would be beyond *our* grasp because the disjunctive empirical complexity that such a theory must track—be they social, cognitive, neurological or all of the above—would far exceed our restricted computational powers.” The enormous complexity of religious phenomena is also a recurrent topic in some of the articles in the present special issue (see in particular Saler).

<sup>4</sup> The exception is Benson Saler, who is an anthropologist.

<sup>5</sup> Stausberg 2009a: 16 (note 25) points to some omissions. In the meanwhile, two important theories of religious experience (which to some extent imply or explicate theories of religion) were published (Taves 2009; McNamara 2009). Both will be discussed in review symposia in the journal *Religion* (in issues 40/4 [2010] and 41/1 [2011] respectively).

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, four authors were for different reasons unable to join us in the present project.

<sup>7</sup> The authors were specifically invited to sketch ideas rather than to provide full-fledged arguments.

As Benson Saler (this issue) points out, if a theory of religion were framed as an integrated theory—i.e. as compatible with data and theory from other fields—this would necessitate the difficult if not impossible task of keeping oneself abreast of developments in such fields. Despite rhetorical praise of interdisciplinary work, this exercise is practically impossible: the complexity of religion effectively integrates it into domains studied by a variety of academic disciplines and fields, most of which are larger and more vibrant than religious studies will likely ever be. While some scholars make brave efforts to engage cutting-edge work from other disciplines (see e.g., Geertz this issue), the task of translating theoretical models from these fields is quite demanding also for the reason that these models often point to types of data that so far have not been scrutinized by scholars of religion, because it calls for research methods that in turn require extensive training and material infrastructures not always available to us.

In recent decades, the study of religion has witnessed a decisive and deliberate turning away from so-called *sui generis* approaches to the study of religion.<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, the embedded character of religion is now routinely, and rightly, emphasized. These days, nobody would deny the dynamic interchanges between religion, culture, society, economy, the law, etc. On the level of theory, however, these obvious facts have dramatic implications. Given the intimate connectedness of religion with other domains of human life, changes in the understanding of the latter will invariably have repercussions for our conceptualization of religion.

Since religion is an integrated part of human culture, any theory of religion will at least implicitly have to address a series of fundamental issues concerning human beings and human culture. Depending on their takes on these issues, theories of religion will turn out quite differently. One such issue is human nature, or anthropology. Views of human nature which speak of human beings mainly as carriers of brains and protagonists of cognitive processes, or to variables within overarching self-sustaining systems of communication, will necessarily result in theories of religion that are quite different from theories that ascribe to humans an almost unbounded capacity for the creation of meaning and symbolization or which emphasize the temporal structure of human existence. Views of the self as autonomous individuals and relational models of the self will yield distinct theories of religion. Similarly, different views of human agency and rationality, different theories of action and of decision-making obviously are consequential for theories of religion.

---

<sup>8</sup> Many seem to conflate two issues here: the denial of a so-called *sui generis* approach does not logically entail the denial of the possible specificity of religion.

Different, often inconsistent and sometimes contradictory views of human nature and society assign priority to specific problems and, conversely, engage different key concepts, not all of which can be reasonably integrated into one and the same theoretical framework.

Another fundamentally relevant area of theoretical commitments concerns human communication and language.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that both religion and theories of religion are based on language. Meaning and semantics, in particular, are important here. Few, if any, would doubt that religions are powerful generators of meanings, that “religions are means and ways of making sense” (Jensen 2004: 249), but it seems that semantic theory so far has received little attention in the study of religion\'. In this issue, Steven Engler and Mark Gardiner outline the main implications of one philosophical theory, namely Donald Davidson’s semantic theory based on a holistic view of linguistic understanding, for theories of religion. As a metatheoretical framework, the commitment to this semantic philosophy is also consequential for the ways in which religion can be ‘seen’ and studied, which illustrates the necessary triangulation between method, theory, and ‘data’. Engler and Gardiner reflectively acknowledge that their endorsement of semantic holism and the important conclusions they derive from this philosophy notwithstanding, semantic holism is itself not beyond critique. Not only, therefore, are perspectives in theories of religion greatly enhanced by the ability of scholars to translate relevant philosophical and meta-theoretical approaches and frameworks into the horizon of discussion current in the study of religion\’s—a task greatly facilitated in this case by the cooperation between a scholar of religion (Engler) and a philosopher (Gardiner)<sup>10</sup>—but at the same time the validity of these approaches and frameworks, which in most cases are disputed within their original contexts of discovery and discussion, are limiting factors and can in themselves only in rare cases be challenged by theoreticians of religion. In the present issue, Jeppe Sinding Jensen’s article is a case in point in that he draws on his own revision of philosophical issues in cognitive sciences, which he elaborates to the more encompassing notion of normative cognition. On a much more modest scale than Engler/Gardiner and Jensen, my own article (Stausberg this issue) draws on another philosophy, that of John R. Searle, in the hope that this may help to detangle some issues that, in my view, have obfuscated recent thinking about religion in our discipline.

---

<sup>9</sup> Luhmann 2000 is a theory of religion that reads religion as (a system of) communication; for a discussion, see Beyer 2009.

<sup>10</sup> E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley offer another example of teamwork between a scholar of religion and an analytical philosopher.

### **Complexity, Cognition, and Discourse**

During the past two decades the cognitive sciences have been active producers of theoretical models for the study of areas that used to be considered as prerogatives of the humanities and social sciences. There now are established cognitive branches within several disciplines (think of cognitive anthropology, cognitive archaeology, and cognitive psychology), and the so-called Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) has been a stimulating yet controversial development in our field. In this issue, Aaron Hughes confirms suspicions against theoretical agendas that are driven by what he calls “science envy” (see also Day 2010) and he prefers a humanistic version of reductionism, while some other contributors are more sympathetic to cognitive theories and instead try to build bridges. Benson Saler advocates, what he regards as strengths of cognitive approaches as an explanatory project, obvious limits notwithstanding, and he goes on to review some of the criticisms that have been mounted against the cognitive study of religion. As a means of overcoming some of the limitations of current cognitive theories of religion, Saler proposes what he calls a “polychromatic theorizing”, modelled on epigenetic theory, which he hopes does a better job to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of religion.

This is a first stage towards dealing with the issue of complexity as more than a rhetorical figure in anti-reductionist discourse. Being sceptical towards reductionism as an (exclusive) epistemological strategy, it becomes important to discuss alternative strategies. Far from being specific to culture, complexity is a key challenge for sciences across the culture-nature divide.<sup>11</sup> The philosopher of science Sandra Mitchell, for example, suggests that one needs to adopt different epistemological strategies in order to account for complexity. She points to three such strategies, namely pluralism, pragmatism, and dynamics (Mitchell 2008: 22-27). Pluralism aims at integrating a plurality of models on different levels of explanation, while pragmatism, which rejects theoretical absolutism, would remind us that the selection and functionality of explanatory models depends on the kind of aims and questions that need to be addressed, where different models work on different levels of explanation. Last but not least, dynamism acknowledges the fact that the world is constantly

---

<sup>11</sup> Adams (2001) illustrates how the concept of complexity has become increasingly complex in archaeology. While formerly referring to societies with a high level of inequality and heterogeneity (such as in ancient cities, states, and civilizations), the subject has now “become a many-stranded approach to diverse classes of phenomena whose principal characteristics is that their properties and behaviors cannot be adequately described or explained by the interaction of a few, relatively simple, law-like principles” (Adams 2001: 350). Apparently, computer modelling plays a great part in such strategies.

changing, and so must knowledge about the world. (This is clearly also the case for religion's and for theories that account for religion's.) As a possible counter-strategy to reductionism (which she does not reject as such, but only when it is declared to be the only viable option), Mitchell argues that the concept of emergence (a) reflects the observation that the interdependence of parts can result in new features not possessed by any of these parts and (b) acknowledges feedback loops and processes of self-organisation, which cannot be predicted from their constitutive pieces, but which allow for the emergence of higher-order properties, and which may, in a top-down causality, impact on the constituent parts, which in turn enable the working of the higher orders (Mitchell 2008: 35-54). Moreover, Mitchell argues for local and contextual theories rather than for global and universal ones (Mitchell 2008: 152). The implications for theories of religion are obviously far-reaching.

Some of the criticism mounted against what Jensen (2009) calls the "standard cognitive science of religion model"<sup>12</sup> revolves around its apparent neglect of culture. In this issue, by drawing on a wide range of current theorizing in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences and the neurosciences, but in particular inspired by the work of American anthropologist and neuroscientist Terence Deacon and Canadian psychologist Merlin Donald, Armin Geertz outlines a much needed expansion of limited views of cognition and proposes a "biocultural theory of religion". Elaborating on a model by Jensen (2003), Geertz suggests that such a theory, which appears to be a grandiose undertaking, would need to cover five aspects of religion—origin, form, function, structure, and meaning—on four levels of reality, namely the neurobiological, the cognitive-psychological, the sociological, and the semantic-semiotic.

In his chapter, Jensen sketches a model of what he terms 'normative cognition', a short-hand generic term introduced to refer to processes of cognition that are bound to, or conditioned by, socio-cultural norms, which scholars of religion typically encounter in cosmologies, classification systems, morality, purity rules, etc. As an analytical term, normative cognition points to the interrelations between brain, cognition, and culture, which are neglected in internalist research programs that eliminate culture as a causal factor. In devising this bio-cultural model, Jensen draws on a body of literature from developmental, evolutionary, cultural and moral psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, social anthropology and religious studies. The notion of normative cognition is relevant to theories of religion "because it informs us of how and why humans have the ability first to construct and then to draw on collective systems of norms."

---

<sup>12</sup> This wording is a nod to what evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Lena Cosmides regard as the untenable presuppositions of what they call "the Standard Social Science Model" (Tooby and Cosmides 1992).

As I see it, some of the appeal of some cognitivist theories has been their strategy to 'naturalize' religion by portraying it as a trade-off or a spin-off of routine everyday cognitive processes. This may resonate with a scholarly tradition that has struggled against treating religion as a *sui generis* affair, which is principally detached from the profane reality of everyday life and standard science methodologies.<sup>13</sup> While this strategy has stimulated scholarship and provided some important insights, a wider variety of cognitive facilities and processes are relevant for theories of religion than has been hitherto explored by cognitive scholars of religion. In their articles, Geertz, Jensen, and Benavides provide several examples. In addition, concepts such as specialness (Taves 2009), extremes (Benavides 2002) and the imaginary (in this issue evoked by Hughes with reference to political scientist Jean-François Bayart) point into other directions that call for exploration by theoreticians of religion.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on cognition has become a serious contender for the centrality of the notion of discourse that has (albeit in an under-theorized manner) featured centrally in conceptualizations of religion in the wake of poststructuralist or postmodernist approaches.<sup>15</sup> Where cognitivists have tried to emphasize common patterns across religious cultures, discursivists have a tendency to emphasize religious variety (though on a metatheoretical level they often implicitly privilege functionalist accounts related to the construction of identities and the formation of power-relationships). While cognitive scholars tend to criticize discursive approaches for subscribing to 'impossible' anthropological assumptions and theoretical vagueness, discursivists have started to 'deconstruct' cognitive theories and attempted to lay bare their political agendas (which are roughly defined as neo-liberal, whereas most discursivists share soft or strong leftist/Marxist legacies). The two camps seem divided by epistemological and metatheoretical abysms which at present inhibit meaningful exchanges,<sup>16</sup> even though, from a purely theoretical point of view, both concepts should be able to cross-fertilize since both are ultimately dependent upon each other: there is no discourse that is not subject to cognitive and communicative frameworks, and cognition to a large extent is transmitted and gains social relevance in discourse.

---

<sup>13</sup> In my contribution, I highlight some theoretical tendencies that reify the anti *sui generis* approach into a second degree *sui generis* approach, a process I call *reverse sui generis* (Stausberg this issue).

<sup>14</sup> See Strauss (2006) for a review of main theories of the imaginary.

<sup>15</sup> Although the term is ubiquitously used by students of religion, Murphy (2000) and Engler (2006) so far seem to be the only attempts to present a coherent discussion of the concept. In the present issue, Hughes engages discourse as one of his key-terms (besides identity and invention); at the same time, he is critical towards cognitive approaches.

<sup>16</sup> This has become clear in a review symposium (in *Religion* 40/4 [2010]) on a book that has tried to accommodate both 'scientific' and 'critical' thinking (Taves 2009).

## **Evolutionary Models**

Cognitive theories of religion are often (albeit not intrinsically) linked to evolutionary theory.<sup>17</sup> The evolutionary paradigm raises the theoretical problem whether religion is an adaptation or a by-product, a question which is hotly debated at present. While some theorists (Guthrie 1993; see Saler 2009; Boyer 2001; Jensen 2009) point to the evolutionary processes underpinning religious cognition and formations, other evolutionary approaches to religion tend to look at religions as solutions to evolutionary problems such as altruism, morality, coordination and cooperation in groups. In this issue, Joseph Bulbulia and Marcus Frean address the problem of cooperation among anonymous partners or strangers (i.e. not in face-to-face situations or in small groups), which is especially difficult to establish and prone to defection. Criticizing and extending on earlier solutions to this problems (which Bulbulia himself helped to develop), Bulbulia and Frean now argue that the main problem for inherently fragile cooperation is not cheating or theft but uncertainty. They hold that, in order to solve this problem, natural and cultural selection has devised complex informational ecological designs that they believe trigger cooperative motivations automatically, on cue. Bulbulia and Frean refer to this as 'charismatic' models of signalling, where "the adjective 'charismatic' applies to properties of ecologies designed to exert predictable behavioural control over distributed, potentially anonymous partners." This control is achieved by religious things and practices affecting the bodies of people (and not necessarily only 'religious' persons). These ecologies generate motivational alignment and synchronicity among (anonymous) partners. According to this (admittedly conjectural 'how possibly' model) these effects are achieved by signals that work automatically, "on cue, without reliance on belief", and hence based on "non-declarative cognition". All this cannot but leave little or no room for human intentionality, autonomous agency, or reflective beliefs like the ones addressed by Jensen in his model of normative cognition. The processes this model builds on are largely pre- or meta-reflective; in fact, one may surmise that such ecologies will not work if they are subject to consciously held beliefs, which invariably are open to doubt.

In his article, Gustavo Benavides links cognitive processes such as symbolization, metarepresentation and the creation of 'as if' worlds to evolutionary theories, and he grounds such processes in anthropological constraints and needs other than the establishment of cooperation. Just as football stars whose achievements combine "purposeful deed and apparent gratuitousness", divine

---

<sup>17</sup> See Lawson/McCauley (1990) for a cognitive theory of religion which is not grounded in evolutionary theory; see Engler & Gardiner 2009.

agents are often perceived in such a way as to be beyond need. In ordinary circumstances, needs are met by hard work and labour, within societies that are typically organized in stratified and hierarchical terms ruled by elites that often-times compel others to work for them, thereby acting as if they were gods, surrounding their power by “aesthetical elaboration” as a token of surplus. In the account provided by Benavides, who also draws on a wide range of reading, the evolution of religion is to be grounded in social, political, and economical processes—or social evolution, where generation and production, circulation and deferral, consumption and accumulation, debt and payment become processes held to be responsible for the continuous emergence of religion.

As I see it, one problem in theories of religion is a lack of differentiation of the subject matter. Hence, in my own article I argue in favour of a theoretical strategy that does not conflate but distinguishes between theorizing religion and related concepts such as (the) religious, (the) sacred, etc. Moreover, in my view, religion is not an unchangeable static subject. As a result, I outline three distinctive evolutionary processes of differentiation that have given various shapes to what we refer to as religion: attributive, structural, and functional differentiation respectively. This account points to the evolution of the category of religion, which, as in Benavides’ article, is grounded in processes of social evolution, rather than stipulating religion to appear as the resolution of evolutionary problems.

### **Science and Naturalism**

During the past years, the current editor of this journal, Matthew Day, has repeatedly pointed to epistemological and meta-theoretical limitations of the cognitive science of religion (see Day 2004; 2007). More recently, Day has started to engage the work of the French anthropologist/sociologist of science Bruno Latour (Day 2009; see also Stausberg this issue). In the present issue, Day joins in the chorus of those who sing the swan song of the category of religion, but rather than once again rehearsing this by now familiar tune, he argues that the field should reinvent itself by looking more “more like the field of science studies” as advanced by Bruno Latour (and for which he invokes Heidegger as a formative ancestor). This move draws attention to what is ‘really’ happening on that stage, once it has been freed from ‘religion’. Instead of looking at the gods and other (religious) agents as puppets moved by manipulators who are pulling the strings from behind the scene (where the manipulators would be the objects of study), following Latour, Day argues that gods and other non-human actors who circulate within given networks must be regarded as actors rather than as effigies by the post-religion study of

religion. Rather than unmasking the manipulators, as the emancipatory social sciences had wanted (see Stausberg this issue), Day (this issue) argues that post-religion scholars of religion “must gather... courage and liberate the gods”; rather than adopting a methodological and epistemological atheism keen to reveal their constructed and illusory character, this kind of study must acknowledge that “the gods are *real actors* with *relative existence*”—an existence, however, which requires considerable efforts to be kept alive, which, I suppose, can be read to apply both to the work done by (what some insist on calling) religions as well as by the scholars making a business out of this work.<sup>18</sup> In my own article, I argue that the attention drawn to non-human objects by Latour and other protagonists of so-called Actor-Network-Theory helps to conceptualize the ‘objective’ reality of religion as a complement to its basically intentionality-dependency (Searle).

Matthew Day starts his article with some reflections on ‘naturalist’—or more precisely ‘non-supernaturalist’—accounts of religion, which were the backbone of the ‘modern’ and ‘non-religious’ or ‘non-theological’ study of religion. Day advances a very liberal understanding of what is permitted in the ‘naturalistic’ study of religion (including the ‘liberation of the gods’ thesis and the idea that religious features can be seen to provide “empirical evidence of

---

<sup>18</sup> Note that Latour apparently felt no need to get rid of the category of religion. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005) he repeatedly refers to religion as an example of the predicaments of social explanations that he seeks to overcome. Instead of substituting, or explaining away, the agents that “pious souls” feel attached to, Latour asks: “Why not say that in religion what counts are the beings that make people act, just as every believer has always insisted? That would be more empirical, perhaps more scientific, more respectful, and much more economical than the invention of two impossible non-existing sites: the mind of the believer and the social reality are hidden behind illusions propped up by even more illusions” (Latour 2005: 235). He argues that religion was “mishandled” (236) in mainstream social science and that religion cannot and does not have to be accounted for by social forces (5). Latour’s little known book on religion (not yet translated into English) is an essay (without any headings, chapters, and notes) on the problems of speaking about religion, or the fragile enterprise of speaking religiously, as a critical contemporary intellectual; he frames this as a problem of translation (Latour 2002). In this book, Latour argues that when attempting to speak about religion or to speak religiously one needs to get rid of categories such as belief (vs. science) and the other world and that one should withstand the temptations to rationalize, purify, simplify, adjust, aestheticize, demythologize, symbolize; the more one makes religion modern and acceptable, the less faithful one is to its particular order and problematic. Religion is a veritable lie, where everything is false and everything is true, depending on one’s own stance; its meaning does not lie behind but in front of the letter, where it is not the essence that gives meaning to the attributes, but the attributes that create the essence; it is fabricated in a positive sense (where the relevant question is whether it has been well fabricated), and it is the epitome of relativism. He keeps comparing talk about religion, or religious speech, to the talk of lovers who reaffirm their relationship by saying ‘I love you’. Albeit critical of current discourses, his view of religion here is Ethnocentric and Catholic-centric, and his main interest is on religious utterances and religious ways of speaking.

our close encounters with extra-terrestrials”). Given that the epistemological line between naturalist and other approaches seems to be such a fine one, it is unclear which purpose this distinction can still reasonably serve, especially given the ideological premises that are often associated with the term naturalism (Stausberg 2009a: 11). For Joseph Bulbulia and Marcus Freen, naturalist explanations “address the biological and physical systems (genetic, neural, and cultural . . .) that support commitments respecting gods”. For them, one point with naturalistic approaches is their assumption that “a diversity of systems support religion” as against (non-naturalistic and in that sense also reductionist) ‘magic bullet theories’. Furthermore, the term “naturalist inquiry” serves to align the study of religion’s to “progressive research” as is typical for “scientific domains of knowledge”; in these quarters, however, Bulbulia and Freen find “a lack of scholarly curiosity for religions”.

Moreover, some theoretical pronouncements from these scientists are sometimes surprisingly dilettantish with regard to the empirical evidence and the underlying philosophical agendas; Bulbulia and Freen hold the fact “[t]hat amateur theorising remains widely sanctioned in naturalistic circles is a testimony to the vulnerability of scientists to irrationality, overconfidence, and close-mindedness”. Where Bulbulia and Freen criticize such tendencies as an aberration, Aaron Hughes (this issue), drawing on his reading of the early Heidegger, expresses a much more fundamental concern with regard to the epistemological value of the kind of scientific rationality endorsed by the natural sciences; instead, he proposes a return to a phenomenological tradition in order to lay a more promising epistemological fundament for future theorizing of religion, which accounts for the temporality of existence and the openness of interpretations. Rather than looking at mechanisms and ecological designs that warrant cooperation among strangers, Hughes reminds the scholarly community of the importance of identity, identity formation, and identity politics and the related processes of self- and group-making. While Hughes therefore warns that theorizing about religion “will largely migrate out of the humanities and into the various scientific disciplines”, Bulbulia and Freen warn against the shortcoming of unqualified scientific theories but at the same time hope that the specialist knowledge possessed only by scholars of religion’s will eventually, probably in the form of collaborative efforts, or in the spirit of consilience, cross-fertilize with ‘naturalist inquiry’.

### **Adaptation and Functionalism**

Bulbulia and Freen propagate an adaptationist program. In terms of the philosophy of science, an adaptation amounts to a form of high level func-

tionism.<sup>19</sup> In a technical sense, in biology, according to Martin Mahner and Mario Bunge an adaptation is an 'aptation' that has been retained or improved on by natural selection; an aptation, in turn, is a functional substructure that is valuable to a higher structure, or organism, rather than being of negative value (in which case it would be a maladaptation, or a mal- or dysfunction) or neutral (in which case it would be a nulladaptation).<sup>20</sup> In order to qualify as an aptation a functional sub-system has to operate functionally on an internal level, i.e. on the level of its own biotic activity, and it has to play an active role (perform a function) externally with regard to other systemic units (organs, subsystems) (Mahner/Bunge 2001: 76-79). While functionalism remains of central importance, though disputed, in biology (and in some other fields such as psychology and technology), in the social sciences it has experienced a mixed fate. In anthropology, functionalism, once a prominent and even formative theoretical paradigm, was increasingly criticized since the 1960s on theoretical grounds so that functionalism has been considered "outmoded" since the 1970s (Vincent 2004: 5844). Among its critics one finds among others cultural analysts, processualists, and structuralists (Salzman 2001: 128-129). "Today, to call an explanation functionalist in anthropology is a bit like accusing someone of original sin" as a prominent British anthropologist recently stated—while at the same time admitting a secret "affection for functionalism" (Miller 2010: 147).

Similarly, in sociology classical functionalism was criticized, but at the same time a neofunctionalism emerged, and systems theory gave a powerful new impetus to functionalist thinking in sociology (see Jetkowitz/Stark (eds) 2003 for functionalist traditions in sociology). Accordingly, the system theoretician Niklas Luhmann has developed several varieties of functionalist theories of religion (see Beyer 2009). So has anthropologist Roy Rappaport (see Segal 2009), but among contemporary theoreticians of religion there is some disagreement about functionalism as a theoretical approach (see Stausberg 2009b: 288-289). In his theoretical oeuvre Rappaport was (to Segal's eyes ultimately unsuccessfully) preoccupied with countering aspects of the critique of functionalism put forward by the logical-empiricist philosopher of science Carl Hempel in the 1950s. In his article, Segal reviews Hempel's criticism and the very shallow echo it received among theoretically-inclined scholars in religious studies.

---

<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, an outspoken adaptationist also seeks to defend functionalism (Wilson 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Sometimes, however, because the conditions under which a design has evolved may have changed, adaptations are no longer adaptive.

At the same time, Segal points to later (post-Hempel) developments in philosophy of science that sought to reconceptualise and defend functionalism. In particular, Segal draws attention to the work of Robert Cummins, the main exponent of a ‘systems account’ of functions, the theoretical rival to a historical-selectionist interpretation of functionalism in biology (Macdonald 2001): using a different terminology, while Hempel is a main exponent of an aetiological-teleological variety of functionalism, Cummins stands in the dispositional tradition of functionalist thinking going back to Ernst Nagel (1961), according to which the function basically is the disposition or propensity for achieving or doing something (McLaughlin 2005). In light of a likely extension of Cummins-style functionalism to the social sciences, Segal (this issue) sketches a possible application of this model of functionalism for devising a functionalist theory of religion, or rather for re-describing theories of religion (such as Weber’s) within the framework of such a functional model.<sup>21</sup> As Segal points out, a Cummins-style meta-theory of religion would embed religion in a system far bigger than itself, where it would necessarily operate in conjunction with other sub-systems,<sup>22</sup> but would at the same time need to be doing “its distinctive ‘bit’ ”—which necessarily raises the question of the specificity of religion, one of the four main questions a theory of religion can reasonably be expected to address (Stausberg 2009a).

Turning to a lower level of functionalist designs, the internal activity of religion (what I call its structure) must first be clarified in order to make sure that religion in fact operates internally as a sub-system that, in a logical next step, can contribute to the overarching system. While Segal in his concluding sentence may be right that such an approach is “new”, it still raises many fundamental questions. Even the theoretical prospects suggested in this special issue, then, ultimately raise more questions than they give answers. But when all is said and done that that may well be what science is all about.

\* \* \*

While this introductory essay highlights some threads that run through the present special issue, the articles have been arranged alphabetically by authors’ surnames. The present writer has discussed first drafts of each article with the

---

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin (2005: 25) points to an implication of Cummins-style functionalism which to my eyes is of potential relevance for theories of religion, namely the observer-relative ascription of functionality, i.e. the idea that functions do not exist as absolute or natural givens, but only in relation to systemic structures analyzed by observers, so that functions are linked to the epistemological interests of research. (In the context of religions, these observers can also be insiders. Such claims to functionality are often important strategies of argumentation and rhetorical tactics.)

<sup>22</sup> In my article I point to the necessary interaction of religion with other societal sub-systems.

respective author(s), a process that resulted in various degrees of changes to the articles. Each article was then sent to another author of the present special issue for peer-review; while initially a single-blind process, all referees (with one exception) decided to make their identity known to the respective authors (open peer-review). With one exception, this process resulted in another round of either superficial or substantial revisions.

## References

- Adams, Robert (2001). Complexity in archaic states. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 20(3): 345-360.
- Benavides, Gustavo (2002). La función de los extremos en la constitución de la religión. *Imaginário* 8: 121-130.
- Beyer, Peter (2009). Religion as communication: on Niklas Luhmann, *The religion of society* (2000). In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 99-114. London, New York: Routledge.
- Boyer, Pascal (2001). *Religion Explained: the evolutionary origins of religious thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Day, Matthew (2004). The ins and outs of religious cognition. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16(3): 241-255.
- (2007). Let's be realistic: evolutionary complexity, epistemic probabilism, and the cognitive science of religion. *Harvard Theological Review* 100(1): 47-64.
- (2009). Constructing religion without *the social*: Durkheim, Latour, and extended cognition. *Zygon* 44(3): 719-737.
- (2010). The Educator Must Be Educated: the study of religion at the end of the humanities. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22(1): 1-8.
- Engler, Steven (2006). Discourse. In Kocku von Stuckrad, Christoph Auffarth, Jutta Bernard and Hubert Mohr (eds.) *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* 1: 516-519.
- Engler, Steven & Mark Quentin Gardiner (2009). Religion as superhuman agency: on E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion* (1990). In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 22-38. London, New York: Routledge.
- Guthrie, Stewart Elliott (1993). *Faces in the Cloud: a new theory of religion*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding (2003). *The Study of Religion in a New Key: theoretical and philosophical soundings in the comparative and general study of religion*. (Studies in Religion 3.) Arhus: Arhus University Press.
- (2004). Meaning and religion: on semantics in the study of religion. In Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi R. Warne (eds), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol 1: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*, 219-252. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.
- (2009). Religion as the unintended product of brain functions in the 'standard cognitive science of religion model': on Pascal Boyer, *Religion explained* (2001) and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How religion works* (2003). In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 129-155. London, New York: Routledge.
- Jetzkowitz, Jens & Carsten Stark (eds) (2003). *Soziologischer Funktionalismus. Zur Methodologie einer Theorietradition*. Leske und Budrich: Opladen.
- Latour, Bruno (2002). *Jubiler ou Les tourments de la parole religieuse*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond le Seuil.

- (2005). *Reassembling the Social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. (Clarendon lectures in management studies.) Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lawson, E. Thomas & Robert N. McCauley (1990). *Rethinking Religion: connecting cognition and culture*. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas (2000). *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Macdonald, G. (2001). Functional Explanation: Philosophical Aspects. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 5833-5838.
- Mahner, Martin & Mario Bunge (2001). Function and functionalism: a synthetic perspective. *Philosophy of Science* 68(1): 75-94.
- McLaughlin, Peter (2005). Funktion. In Ulrich Krohs and Georg Toepfer (eds), *Philosophie der Biologie. Eine Einführung*, 19-35. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- McNamara, Patrick (2009). *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, Daniel (2010). *Stuff*. Cambridge, Malden/Mass.: Polity Press.
- Mitchell, Sandra (2008). *Komplexitäten. Warum wir erst anfangen, die Welt zu verstehen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Murphy, Tim (2000). Discourse. In Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 396-408. London, New York: Cassell.
- Nagel, Ernest (1961). *The Structure of Science: problems in the logic of scientific explanation*. New York: Harcourt.
- Pals, Daniel L. (2006). *Eight theories of religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Riesebrodt, Martin (2007). *Cultus und Heilsversprechen. Eine Theorie der Religion*. München: C.H. Beck.
- (2009). *The Promise of Salvation: a theory of religion*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Saler, Benson (2009). Anthropomorphism and animism: on Stewart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the clouds* (1993). In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 99-114. London, New York: Routledge.
- Salzman, Philip Carl (2001). *Understanding Culture: an introduction to anthropological theory*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press.
- Segal, Robert A. (2009). Religion as ritual: Roy Rappaport's changing views from *Pigs to the ancestors* (1968) to *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity* (1999). In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 66-82. London, New York: Routledge.
- Stausberg, Michael (ed.) (2009). *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*. Routledge: London, New York.
- (2009a). There is life in the old dog yet: an introduction to contemporary theories of religion. In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 1-21. London, New York: Routledge.
- (2009b). Back and forth. In Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion*, 283-295. London, New York: Routledge.
- Strauss, Claudia (2006). The imaginary. *Anthropological Theory* 6(3): 322-344.
- Taves, Ann (2009). *Religious Experience Reconsidered: a building-block approach to the study of religion and other special things*. Princeton, Woodstock: Princeton University Press.
- Tooby, John & Leda Cosmides (1992). The psychological foundations of culture. In John Tooby, Leda Cosmides and Jerome H. Barkow (eds), *The Adapted Mind: evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*, 19-136. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tweed, Thomas A. (2006). *Crossing and Dwelling: a theory of religion*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Vincent, Jeanne-Françoise (2004). Functionalism in anthropology. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 5844-5847.
- Wilson, David Sloan (2002). *Darwin's cathedral: evolution, religion, and the nature of society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.