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Distinctions, Differentiations, Ontology, and Non-humans in Theories of Religion

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Abstract

This essay has four main parts. (1) Reviewing previous theories of religion, it suggests that it may be helpful not to conflate, *a priori*, the notions of (the) religious on the one hand and religion\s on the other, and that it may be useful to explore concepts such as (the) sacred and transcendence as independent yet related to the business of theorizing religion. (2) Distinguishing social/cultural from biological/genetic evolution, it outlines the occurrence of three processes/stages of the evolution of religious affairs and religions(s), here called attributive, structural, and functional differentiation respectively. While the first two processes/stages occurred in the remote and ancient past respectively, the third process/stage is typical of modernities and has by now globalized. (3) The article argues that recent criticisms of the validity of the category of religion are informed by a reverse *sui generis* approach characterized by a tacit claim that religion is an anomaly, by virtue of its supposedly being inherently different from similar concepts. The article suggests that John Searle's philosophy may throw light on the mode of existence (ontology) of religion as an example of social and institutional reality, as an intentionality- and observer-relative yet real and empowering structure. (4) In the final section, the article engages some lines of thinking of Bruno Latour's interpretation of Actor-Network-Theory, in particular the category of non-humans and the importance of things (objects) for social reality, including religion.

Keywords

theory of religion, the sacred, Actor-Network-Theory, evolution, differentiation, objects, intentionality, *sui generis*, John R. Searle, Bruno Latour

> There exists no direct relation between being real and being indisputable
> Bruno Latour (2005: 111)

Many pressing problems remain to be addressed, if not resolved, in theories of religions (see my introductory essay to this special issue for some). In this article, I will briefly point to four issues that, as I see it, have all too seldom been acknowledged in recent theories of religion.

First, while theories of religion obviously have religion[1] as their theoretical object, sometimes they revert to related concepts such as the sacred. To my eyes, it will be helpful, in future theorizing, to explore the different potentials of such concepts, rather than conflating them from the outset. Moreover, the question is whether it is sufficient to take religion as one's end or starting point, or whether it is helpful to distinguish the noun religion from the adjective religious in order to arrive at a more differentiated theoretical account, which may avoid some theoretical traps.[2] On my view, besides yielding a richer theoretical approach, the suggested theoretical distinction between religion and (the) religious also does justice to historical developments, which in turn acknowledges the historical nature of religion and (the) religious.

Second, this distinction may therefore allow for a historical theorizing, i.e. the development of a theory that regards the historicity of its object/subject as a precondition which needs to be recognized right from the start. The historicity of religion will here be addressed in terms of three sets of evolutionary differentiations.

Third, the fundamental historical character of religion also spills over to the question of the ontology of religion (i.e. its mode of existence).[3] Framed in terms of the debate on the presumed *sui generis* character of religion, this topic has in fact been an implicit leitmotif of theoretical discussion in the field during the past decades. Conversely, the critique of essentialism and, correspondingly, the theoretical career of constructivism have illustrated the necessity to rethink the form/kind/type/way of being (i.e. ontology) of religion. Here, this will be done by engaging some suggestions of the widely known American philosopher John R. Searle, whose work on the making of social reality has not

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[1] To my eyes (at the time of writing), putting the word religion in inverted commas or qualifying the invocation of this contested category by saying "what we call religion" or similarly amounts to a comedy of innocence routinely performed by many of us in a futile attempt to save our face and appear as politically correct. In this article, for once, there is no need for any of this.

[2] Taves (2009: 24) presents a similar argument: "'Religion' is an abstraction that elides the distinction between the adjectival (things deemed religious, sacred, mystical, et cetera) and nominative (religions, spiritualities, paths, et cetera) use of terms and thus obscures the relationship between simpler and more complex phenomena." In the following, however, I don't conceptualize the difference between the adjective and the noun in terms of simplicity versus complexity. See also Nye 2000 for a discussion of taking the adjective as a starting point in rethinking religion.

[3] My understanding of this concept is not linked to the recent 'ontological turn' in social anthropology where ontology is traded as a possible substitute for culture; see the debate "Ontology is just another word for culture" in *Critique of Anthropology* 30/2 (2010).

found his way into religious studies debates,[4] whereas it has been discussed in social anthropology.[5]

Fourth and last, where Searle's thinking on social ontology proceeds from human minds and intentionality, religious discourses and practices typically engage non-human agents and objects. While this observation, in my understanding, can be accommodated into Searle's philosophy, a possible extension of this theoretical perspective could draw on a line of thinking often referred to as Actor-Network-Theory, here in the interpretation of the French anthropologist/philosopher/sociologist Bruno Latour.

I. Distinctions

Theories of religion seek to account for, make sense of, or explain religion. In most extant theories it remains unclear whether religion comprises the sum of everything considered religious, or whether there is a difference between religion and religious—a difference that goes beyond matters of grammar. To highlight the problem, consider the following comparisons: to what extent is a theory of law the same as a theory of the righteous, which is a core notion around which systems of law are organized? While the concept of the beautiful is certainly indispensible for constructing a theory of the arts, the latter would probably amount to more than a mere extrapolation of the notion of beautifulness. Uttering deep words of wisdom and truth does not yet amount to philosophy. While knowledge certainly, or hopefully, is indispensible to understanding science, the latter can probably not be accounted for purely in terms of knowledge; likewise, it is difficult to think of politics without the notion of power, yet politics can most likely not be theorized purely as mechanisms of power regulation; and where the notions of game and play are crucial to account for sports, the latter cannot be explained solely in terms of any of these. The possible distinction between religion and (the) religious is therefore more than a matter of rhetoric and definitions.

Let us review one attempt at differentiations in theories of religion, suggested by sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000; French original 1993),[6]

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[4] As far as I can tell, the name does not appear in any of the books discussed in Stausberg (ed.) 2009, but he is briefly mentioned in two contributions. Jeppe Sinding Jensen appears to be the only religious studies theoretician who sometimes makes (positive) mention of Searle's philosophy (see Jensen 2003; 2008); Pyysiänen (2009: 43) briefly mentions Searle as well.

[5] See the special issue of *Anthropological Theory* (6(1) 2006) edited by Roy D'Andrade.

[6] Martin Riesebrodt distinguishes between religion, religiosity, and religious traditions (Riesebrodt 2007: 12-13). His differentiation will not be discussed here since it is mostly technical/definitional.

who is concerned with analyzing the character and transformation of religion in modernity beyond the secularization narrative. Dissatisfied with restricting the analysis of religion in modernity to the field of organized and institutionalized religion, Hervieu-Léger reviews the discussion about religion in fields traditionally considered as non-religious. She attempts to trace "a dynamic concept of religion in modernity" (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 70), one that tries "to dissociate religion from its institutional, more specialized, aspects and to trace the way it has fragmented across the social spectrum" (109) and that "constitutes an instrument with which to identify manifestations of religious believing in any social context whatever" (101). For this reason, Hervieu-Léger thinks that the concept of religion needs to be "desubstantialized" (75), to the effect that nothing can "be *a priori* religious, political or whatever" (75). Consider belief. While believing, as a basic form of convictions, is indeed crucial to religion, it is not limited to religion, but can be found in many spheres; religion is a specific configuration of believing, namely one that is "characterized by the legitimizing reference to tradition" (100) to which the individual and group find themselves connected in a direct genealogical manner. For Hervieu-Léger, memory, anamnesis, and tradition are not only necessary, but also sufficient conditions for the identification of a practice as religious/religion: "The existence of such a practice, by means of which a group of believers signifies to itself and to the world outside its adherence to a continuing line of descent which gives entire justification to its relationship with the present, is ground enough for considering that one is dealing with religion" (125). The theoretical work that achieves a theory of religion is here done by the notions of believing, memory, and tradition.

This is not the place to provide a discussion of Hervieu-Léger's theory, but it is worth recalling that she repudiates an approach to theorizing religion, epitomized by Durkheim and the rivalling 'phenomenological' tradition, which posits the notion of the sacred as the ultimate cornerstone of theories of religion. To her eyes—and I think she has a point here—"the mutual involvement of the sacred and religion by binding them relentlessly together" (60), i.e. the strategy to theorize religion in terms of the sacred and to link the idea of the sacred to the concept of religion, produces "a circularity" and "prevents perception of what is specific of both the one and the other" (60). This opens the door for conceptual distinction and theoretical diversification, where the sacred, or sacredness, and religion appear as two different dimensions, which may overlap—according to Hervieu-Léger this is typically the case in traditional societies—or they may become dissociated, which she holds to be a typical characteristic of modern societies (103-104). This distinction does not exclude the possibility that both the sacred and religion, each in its own way, construct meaning (103-104). In her interpretation, which clearly carries a

Durkheimian heritage, the sacred is a (collective) "experience of encountering a force and a presence that is stronger than self" (106), or which transcends individual consciousness (103). I am not here concerned with the plausibility and validity of that particular interpretation—in fact several other reinterpretations of the category of the sacred have been proposed besides those discussed by Hervieu-Léger (see, for example, Colpe 1990; Anttonen 2000; Knott 2005)[7]—nor am I at this point expressing a view on the promise and validity of the category of the sacred, which in religious studies circles (not quite without reason) has become some kind of an intellectual taboo. Nevertheless, if we are open to exploring its validity for a moment, the sacred is an example of a category of potential significance for theories of religion, a category which cannot be used to explain religion, and which is not isomorphic with the sphere of religion. The increasingly popular (and therefore also increasingly obscure, but still potentially useful) category of spirituality likewise promises to point to spheres of meaning which overlap with what is often categorized as religion, without being identical with it. Consider also the concept of transcendence. As I see it, theories of religion would be well advised to explore the conceptual terrain that intersects with religion rather than subsuming all family-related business under one theoretical enterprise.[8]

Let us also consider the possibility that religion is not the same thing as (the) religious. While theories of religion will have a hard time if they try to avoid specifying how something qualified as religious is different from other affairs (communication, concepts, discourses, events, practices, rituals, etc.),[9] identifying a religious quality is not sufficient for identifying a facet of religion.[10] To my eyes, affairs can be qualified (categorized, classified, deemed, experienced, perceived, processed) as religious, or communicated in religious forms or modes (to be specified by a theory of the religious or religious affairs) without these affairs necessarily falling within the domain of religions.[11]

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[7] Note that the category of the sacred is also used by scholars from other fields, often explicitly beyond the sphere of religion; see, e.g., Agamben 2005 (1995) [English translation 1997].

[8] Consider also the academic career of the categories myth and ritual, which many scholars now agree are not intrinsically connected to religion even though they, from a structural point of view, are important for theories of religion (and are even held to be constitutive for religion by some theorists). See Platvoet 2006 for the genealogy of "secular ritual."

[9] I am here suggesting the metaphor of 'affairs' rather than the metaphors of facts and things, which carry with them different sorts of epistemological baggage; I am of course aware that even the word "affairs", being a metaphor, is not value-free and may evoke a certain *Vorverständnis*. See Tweed (2006) for the importance of metaphors in theories of religion.

[10] Joseph Bulbulia suggests the following analogy: Airplanes fly. The property of flight, indeed, is constitutive of objects in this category. Yet not all objects that fly are airplanes.

[11] Luhmann's theory (2002) seems ambivalent here, since he, on the one hand, argues that religious communication is only to be found within religious systems, while he, in a later

Another way of expressing this point is that the concept of religious points to a social relation (usually involving affairs somehow linked to superhuman agency), whereas the notion of religion always involves institutional settings. The occurrence of religious communication is not bound to religions, but religious institutions recursively canalize religious communications.

Identifying *a priori* and thereby conflating the religious and religion\s in theories of religion has, to my eyes, led to confusion both diachronically and synchronically. Synchronically, it results in endless discussions about the possible religious status of other systems. Yet, the fact that religious communication and religious elements occur outside the boundaries of religions (as systemic formations, the regularities and rules of which will need to be specified by a theory of religion) can only be perceived as surprising if one *a priori* identifies the religious with the religions—an identification that is not logically necessary, but may well result from historical contingency. Diachronically, this conflation is the backbone to observations that even if there is an abundance of evidence of religious in given cultures, not all of these cultures appear to have religions. It is only when identifying—and conflating—the concepts of religious and religions that one is forced to construct systemic entities of the religion-type around religious affairs (see also Stausberg 2001); the resulting situation is then often reflected by scholars speaking of religion being "embedded" in social structures (see Nongbri 2008).

Differentiating between the religious and the religion\s leads to the observation that not all religious communication or affairs are necessarily part of religions. On the other hand, religions are more than an assemblage of religious communications and affairs. Religions incorporate non-religious affairs (just as the arts are more than aesthetic communication and an assemblage of beautiful things; or consider the law, which contains more than righteous communication and affairs). In addition, religions usually communicate about non-religious affairs.[12] Here, the conflation of religion\s and the religious has once again created unnecessary confusion, such as when it is argued that religion is not a valid theoretical category because religions have economic, political and other repercussions.

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chapter, analyzes the processes of differentiation that result in the formation of such a system, where he assumes that religious communication already occurs prior to the differentiation of a religious system. Taves (2009) allows for "special things" outside of religion, while at the same time holding the view that special things are component parts, or building blocks, of more complex formations (i.e. religions). Note, however, that different religions also make different affairs (or "things" in her parlance) appear religious (top-down).

[12] In addition, religions typically communicate about other religions. This, in turn, is a sign of the formation of religions rather than an open field of religious affairs.

This is not the place to engage in a discussion about what precisely constitutes religious affairs and why this is so. Let us not exclude the possibility that religious affairs are some kind of anthropological universals, perhaps grounded in the processes of the formation of the 'modern' human being (in archaeological terms, where 'modern' human behaviour is held to have originated some 75,000 years BCE), whereas religion\s has emerged as the result of processes, which can be described in historical and/or evolutionary terms (see below). Furthermore, it seems that there is some kind of consensus that religious affairs can said to be present when they perceivably engage/involve a certain genre of agents and agency; the latter are often qualified as supernatural, counterintuitive, human-like yet non-human/nature-like yet non-natural/animal-like yet non-animal, special, or transcendent (see, e.g., Pyysiäinen 2009). To my eyes, the distinctiveness of the engagement/involvement of this agency/these agents is empirical in the sense that it is recognized, attested or reported by a variety of source materials; it is empirical and observable insofar as any historical source allows us to observe anything. While these sources use different names, terms and language games to address this perceived categorical distinctiveness, in the scholarly language game the established abstraction to refer to this "flow" (Tweed 2006) of distinctiveness is 'religious'. There is no space to elaborate on this here. But once again, it is entirely possible that this distinctive flow can be found outside of the riverbeds of religions. In the following section, I will briefly discuss some reconstructions of historical scenarios that can be read as throwing light on such a process of differentiation and formation of religion\s.

II. Differentiations

It is important not to confuse two types of evolution: biological/genetic and social/cultural. I am aware that, beyond a common nature/culture dichotomy, biological (Darwinian) evolution includes cultural and social processes; theories of social evolution, on the other hand, do not necessarily adopt a biological point of departure. Biological (Darwinian) theories try to explain religion as a mode of resolving evolutionary problems, often connected to what is held to be distinct and constitutive for human beings/culture. Examples include altruism, cooperation and warfare, group-formation and -coherence, language, modes of reproduction, sociality, and symbolization. Non-biological theories of cultural/social/societal evolution, on the other hand, focus on issues such as patterned changes in societal differentiation, division of labour, structures of (political) power, the use of economical and other resources—and their impact

on religion.[13] Cultural/social/societal evolution comprises contingent and arbitrary historical processes. It is important not to confuse any of these two heterogeneous families of theories of evolution with evolutionism, which is often teleological. Reverse engineering is only partially possible in the case of theories of cultural/social/societal evolution.

For the evolution of religion\s, there are at least three relevant processes of differentiation that would need to be set out in detail; I suggest referring to them as attributive, structural, and functional differentiations. While the former processes have occurred in remote and ancient times, respectively, the third process is generally held to be part of the genesis of modernities.

(a) What I call *attributive differentiation* refers to the communicative process whereby people communicatively select affairs as special (Taves 2009) in terms of specific (divine, superhuman, counterintuitive) agency and agents. There is overwhelming evidence that special status has been ascribed, attributed or recognized in all known human cultures (see Riesebrodt 2007 [2009]). While there is some regularity in such ascriptions, attributions, and recognitions, there is also a noteworthy diversity, which should not be painted over by reconstructing some kind of Ur-religion.[14] Yet, recall that the development of this attributive differentiation, which in fact may be concurrent with the genesis of 'modern' human beings, does not amount to the emergence of religion\s.

(b) Where actions, events, people, and places can be attributed a recognizable different/special/specific flow of agency, in cultural and societal terms this did not necessarily translate into the separate sphere I suggest to identify as religion\s. This is the step from attributive to *structural differentiation*. This step is taken when, for instance, persons and places recognized as special obtain a formal status as, for example, priests or temples.[15] I agree with geographer Jared Diamond (2005 [1997]) that advances in food production are an ultimate cause for that kind of structural differentiation to happen.[16] The

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[13] See also Benavides (this issue) for a review of contributions to social evolution.

[14] Often, shamanism is held to be the original kind of religion/religiousness. See Sidky (2010) for a critique of such approaches.

[15] See also Boyer 2002 who conceptualizes this process in terms of the formation of religious guilds.

[16] My support for Diamond's important model of human evolution does not imply that I endorse his functional theory of religion as a support mechanism for what he calls "kleptocracies", i.e. centrally governed non-egalitarian regimes where the wealth produced by the commoners is transferred to the upper classes (see (Diamond 2005 [1997]: 276-278). See Benavides (2000) for the importance of religions and religious communication as resources to legitimate hierarchical understandings of society and of "the ways in which hierarchies are kept in place by sacralisation" (311). See also Benavides (this issue) for the importance of labour and surplus.

domestication of plants and animal species led to food surpluses and storage, which in an "autocalatyic process" (Diamond 2005 [1997]: 111) paved the way for the emergence of large, dense, sedentary, and stratified societies, where, for the first time in human history (call it social evolution), food-producing people (namely peasants) supported non-food-producing elites and specialists such as artisans, scribes, soldiers—and priests (Diamond 2005 [1997]: 90, 261).[17] Since these processes, in Diamond's account, have been favoured by the geographical structures of Eurasia, the structural differentiation of religion has mainly occurred in Eurasian cultures. The increase in complexity of societal organization and the specialization of roles amounts to a structural specification, where religion become a distinct and yet enmeshed societal domain. The distinctiveness of religion, as perceived by actors (see Riesebrodt 2007 [2009] for the evidence from across Eurasia), with regard to other domains and its simultaneous embeddedness within these domains allows for functional connections between religion and its respective contexts. Being embedded in more complex societies meant that resources of these societies were concurrently available to religion; the impact of food production for ritual practices such as sacrifice, advances in technology allowing for the construction of impressive religious sites and the infrastructure needed for its maintenance, and the impact of writing and scripture on the organization of religion are widely recognized developments that cannot be rehearsed here in any detail.

The societal differentiation of religion, however, also went along with the development of new religious 'content' besides organization and institutions, in terms of discourses, ideologies, and practices. Several of these changes have been addressed by a conglomerate historical narrative known as the axial age, a metaphor first coined by the German scholar (philosopher, historian, psychologist, etc.) Karl Jaspers (1949) and then developed and debated further, now often conceptualized as axial cultures or axial civilizations.[18] One interpretation of the cultural and ideological mutations invoked by this concept points to the exploration of wider, more encompassing spatial and temporal horizons and the discovery/invention of another, higher ontological reality, to

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[17] Bloch (2008: 2058) argues in a similar fashion that "[t]he creation of an apparently separate religion is closely tied to the history of the state", or the "separation of religion from the transcendental social" (2060), i.e. the existence of stable and essentialized social roles and groups.

[18] For a critical review, see Breuer 1994. Armstrong 2006 is an impressive attempt at popularization. In the spirit of Jaspers, by invoking the values explored during the axial age, Armstrong hopes to find a foundation for the future. Lambert 2007 is to my eyes the most impressive attempt to write a global history of religions inspired by the axial model.

which the lower sphere is subordinated axiomatically (see Árnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock eds. 2005); some point to the discovery/invention of personal identity, law, new types of collectivities, and reflexive ethics (see Eisenstadt 2005). The point here is not to endorse a specific historiographical narrative but to point to the grave changes in religious orientations occurring in different manners at several places in Eurasia, which I suggest are part of what I call structural differentiation. This scenario is not to be misunderstood as excluding the occurrence of subsequent mutations.

(c) *Functional differentiation*, i.e. the constitution of relatively autonomous societal function systems such as the economy, education, family, law, politics, and science, refers to a process which appears to be specific, and indeed constitutive for modernities. In the case of religion, sociologists tend to relate this process to secularization, be it as its main cause (see, e.g., Luhmann 2002) or as one of its levels of operation, namely the macro-level (Dobbelaere 2004). Whatever one thinks of secularization theories or narratives—this latter term being preferred by the critics—it is clear that once one agrees with the account of functional differentiation, one will need to discuss the consequences of this process for the different sub-systems.

Their relative autonomy predicts that subsystems other than religion are not governed by the same code as religion, but functional differentiation as such does not predict the strength or weakness of religion compared to the other sub-systems (Beyer 2006: 98). Peter Beyer has, to my eyes persuasively, argued that "the variable and contested understandings that we have of the word 'religion' and its various cognates (sometimes neologisms) in other languages are all significantly conditioned by the historical emergence of a particular social structure, an institutional domain, which is the religious system of global society" (Beyer 2006: 3). In other words, globalization, as a historical process and in so far as it affects religion, amounts to the spread of functional differentiation to different parts of the world, including the system of religion. At the same time, with globalization religion appears as "both a category of Western imposition and one institutionalized in all other regions of the world such that it is no longer simply a Western, let alone just Christian, notion" (Beyer 2006: 115), historically and sociologically speaking. Whereas religion as a sectorialized functional domain has thereby become a global category and reality, which is both constructed and effective, the evolutionary account of this is that religion under the condition of functional differentiation works and is negotiated under different premises than before; furthermore, our scholarly discourse is now part of this new global situation; by observing this process, religious studies, as a public academic enterprise, plays an active role in this process.

III. Ontology

As Peter Beyer points out, globalization has brought the category of religion (and related categories) home to a variety of cultures which may not have had such a concept before. It is also worth recalling that the study of religion\s is not alone in engaging the notion of religion, which is shared by discourses in other sub-systems: apart from religionists such as theologians the category is constructed and negotiated by, for example, educators, lawyers, and politicians, to name but some groups of actors. All this attests the vitality of the category as a means to construct and negotiate social reality, and in my opinion, as scholars of religion\s we would be well advised to take this seriously—especially since, if the critics are right, eventually nothing else will be left for us to study (see Beckford 2003). Jonathan Zettel Smith's famous dictum, which is often quoted like a mantra, that religion is "solely the creation of the scholar's study" (Smith 1982, xi)[19] therefore seems to put the scholar of religion\s either in an ivory tower or in an isolationist cage—unless it could be proved that scholars of religion\s use the concept of religion in a markedly different way from others, which to my knowledge has so far not been shown to be the case (and I tend to doubt that it ever will be). It is true that as scholars we may do different things with this concept than others—think of lawyers, artists, or journalists. However, were we to use the term in a manner that could not be understood by others, or not be translated into other discursive language games, we would lose whatever little relevance we might have qua public and not so public intellectuals (especially since others, think of lawyers, politicians and journalists, analyze our ways of using or not using the term just as we analyze their ways of using it); possibly even worse, we would also risk misrepresenting the representations of reality we claim to be studying.

Behind the common reservation or scepticism towards the validity of the category—as understandable and laudable as they may be in light of partly justified and partly exaggerated accusations of ethnocentric, (neo-)colonial and imperialist implications—one can surmise a kind of reverse-*sui-generis*-rhetoric, since the logical implication must be that religion is inherently different from all other categories, because it is clear that *all* concepts used in academic language are constructed, contextualized, fabricated, invented, selective, part of schemes of classification, and what else.[20] Furthermore, all concepts known to me that operate on a similar level of abstraction are to a greater

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[19] I will not here rehearse the broad corpus of exegesis that has tried to save the credibility of this statement.

[20] This does not mean that they are all equally valid. Some constructions/fabrications/selections etc. obviously are/work better than others (in given contexts).

or lesser extent 'contaminated' by their entanglement in political and other social processes. Religion is not different in this respect. Moreover, concepts at a similar level of abstraction have all been criticized within the very disciplines apparently built to study them, in ways similar to the fate suffered by the notion of religion. Consider culture, a concept which is sometimes even invoked as a possible better alternative to religion.[21] Already in 1993 anthropologist Ulf Hannerz sarcastically noted: "it seems that there are now quite a number of anthropologists who, when they hear the word 'culture', will reach for their guns" (Hannerz 1993: 98). And already in 1986 Aram Yengoyan tried to explain the demise of the concept of culture in anthropological theory since the 1960s (Yengoyan 1986). In a recent article one reads: "Alternatives to, and criticisms of, culture as a workable concept are legion" (Venkatesan 2010: 153). When one tacitly talks about religion as if it were an inherently more problematic concept than others, indeed an anomalous one, one therefore tacitly claims that religion is unique while on the surface denying such a claim—what I call reverse-*sui-generis*-rhetoric (because it runs counter to a first-order *sui generis*). Alternatively, one may come up with radical suggestions to reinvent the disciplinary matrix of the humanities, which, of course, would be an exciting project. As with many such exciting projects, (think of various waves of university reform), it is far from obvious that the end-result would be any sort of improvement and the time dedicated to such attempts would be well-spent.

When reviewing this issue, as I see it, it is important to reflect on the ontology of social and institutional reality. On my reading, the second order reverse *sui generis* approach is flawed because it fails to recognize that religion is a fairly typical example of the human creation of contingent yet surprisingly stable social and institutional reality. I agree with Stanley Stowers that "the object of religion is a subset of human social ontology, and that social ontology is also historical ontology" (Stowers 2008: 434). However, while Stowers for his outline of a theory of religion based on practices, their understandings and their linkages (444),[22] draws his inspiration mainly from a range of thinkers and theorists such as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Robert Brandom and Theodore Schatzki, I suggest that the work of the contemporary American philosopher John R. Seale (1995; 2010), which has been characterized as "being at once simple and deep" (Lukes 2006: 6), can help us to understand what kind of stuff that social reality (including religion)

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[21] The concept of music is in a similar predicament.
[22] Riesebrodt 2007 [English 2009] and Nye 2000 are other examples of theories or outlines of theories that place emphasis on practices (which Nye calls "religioning").

is made of, and how that is achieved.[23] Unfortunately, space does not permit a more extensive discussion, but here are some main points. Note that Searle's philosophy is grounded in a philosophy of language and mind, with an emphasis on human intentionality.

Searle makes the strong claim that "all of human institutional reality, and in that sense nearly all of human civilization, is created in its initial existence and maintained in its continued existence by a single, logico-linguistic operation" (Searle 2010: 201). In the latest version of his philosophy, he calls this operation a Status Function Declaration. Status Function refers to the human "capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure. The performance of the function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question" (Searle 2010: 7). Searle's favourite (clearly ethnocentric/homely) examples are private property, dollar bills, and the presidency, which all refer to functions that objects and persons have not in capacity of their physical features alone. It is clear that this implies the human capacity for symbolization (Searle 2006b: 84).

Innumerable examples from religion come to mind: religious specialists and objects are not constituted by their physical properties. Instead, such a function or status needs to be ascribed and then to be recognized and accepted by others. This is the work of the natural biological phenomenon of collective intentionality (Searle 2010: 42), which only exists in individual human brains (44), but which at the same time sets the stage for human cooperation.[24] Collective intentionality is grounded in, yet is irreducible to, individual intentionality in so far as it is neither possible nor necessary to know what is going on in the (intentional) minds of other people in order to achieve certain common goals, to understand the content of their individual intentionality, nor to anticipate their moves in collective intentionality; in that way, collective intentionality "can nonetheless cause the movements of individual bodies" (55). While commands issued by somebody assigned a Status Function can be held to impress intentionality on members of a given collective (again numer-

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[23] This is not meant to imply that I think that Searle's philosophy as such is better than any of the others; it may be, or it may not be—at present I cannot claim any competence at judging this. But I clearly regard Searle as a good starting-point to address some important matters in the study of religion\s.

[24] Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, and Moll (2005) argue that "shared intentionality" is the enabling feature that marks the crucial difference in cognitive structures between humans and other species. For the philosophical debate on collective intentionality see Schmid & Schweikard (eds.) (2009).

ous examples from religions come to mind), in most cases of collective inten-
tionality, besides one's own intention one holds beliefs about what the other
agents are doing (56).[25] This is evidently also the case in religious collectives.
If one follows Searle's line of thinking, the fact that social and institutional
reality is negotiated and can become a matter of contestation is by no means
surprising.

Status Functions, which are grounded in collective intentionality and carry
deontic power, are created by what Searle calls "Declarations", which "change
the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state
of affairs into existence" (Searle 2010: 12). This does not refer to actual or
historical moments of performing a speech act but points to the constitutive
(but for actors often opaque) role of language for the creation of social reality,
even those institutional facts that appear to be of a non-linguistic quality (such
as that Joseph Ratzinger is the Pope). Institutional reality is created by seman-
tics, but semantics are used "to create powers that go beyond semantic powers"
(14); meanings "are used to create powers that go beyond meaning" (113). In
the form of setting constitutive rules ('the oldest son is to become the priest'),
the kind of linguistic operations Searle calls Status Function Declarations
make "something the case by representing it as being the case." (97) The logi-
cal structure of this operation is that something (X) counts as something (Y)
in a given context (C): "X Counts as Y in C" (96-97). In order to maintain
Status Functions, the Status Function Declarations need to be represented
(103). In the case of religions, this is what often appears to be the case in ritu-
als and narratives, the structural necessity of which can be thought to reside in
their capacity to reinforce Status Functions, not the least because they keep
the vocabulary that is relevant for the recognition of the Status Function
alive.

Status functions carry what Searle calls "deontic powers", which are "the
glue that holds society together" (Searle 2006c: 64). These powers can be neg-
ative (obligations, duties) or positive (rights, authorizations) as well as condi-
tional (rights under the condition of meeting a prior requirement), and
disjunctive (when one option excludes another one) (Searle 2010: 9). Deontic
powers "involve getting people to do things without using force" (147). To my
eyes, religions and many religious affairs stand the "test for whether a phenom-
enon or a fact is genuinely institutional", namely "to ask, Does its existence
imply deontic powers, powers such as those of rights, duties, obligations,

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[25] The expected maintenance of such beliefs is crucial to ensure cooperation; this is the con-
text for costly signalling theories, which aim to show that religions provide particularly effective
resources and contexts for creating such beliefs.

requirements, and authorizations?" (91)[26] In religious contexts (and religions), such deontic powers, which are always embedded in (religious) norms, values, and worldviews, are directly or indirectly linked to superhuman/transcendent agency/agents. However, just as there are religious affairs beyond religions, there are deontologies without institutional facts (consider friendship) (91), and there are institutional facts without institutions (think of a wall that functions as a boundary or, in religious contexts, a well that serves as a sanctuary) (94-96).[27] Moreover, not all consequences of institutional facts are themselves institutional facts: that religion can be used for a wide range of purposes is a fact about other institutions but in itself carries no deontological powers; if, however, a state would declare a law which regulates the recognition of religions then this would create new institutional facts (23, with the example of a recession, which as such is no institutional fact).

The acceptance and recognition of deontic powers, which are given by language (because language, in order to function, implies the existence of social commitments), provides "reasons for acting that are independent of our inclinations and desires" (9), i.e. desire independent reasons for action. To my eyes, Searle's theory of rationality in action (Searle 2001) opens up important possibilities for causally analyzing behaviour and decision making which go beyond the constraints of rational choice on the one hand and social and cultural determinism or cognitive reflexes on the other; in this way, a theory based on this model can meet the requirements for social explanation, namely that it identifies causes, "that it flows from the decisionmaking of rational agents" and that it presupposes "interpretation of specific norms, values, and worldviews" (Little 1991: 2).

People, Searle holds, often tend to believe that social institutions are part of the natural order of things; sometimes they are believed to be the offspring of divine will (107). Religious discourses, it is widely acknowledged, often have the effect of making the natural and human world appear to be grounded in transcendental and supernatural and supernatural realities, for example by deference to an encompassing tradition (see Hervieu-Léger above). At the same time, people tend to accept institutions because they expect to benefit from them. For Searle, social institutions are not primarily mechanisms of social oppression, but because they regulate and maintain power-structures between humans (106) they are "enabling structures that increase human

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[26] Searle (2010: 92) holds that "Church is an institution; religion is not." I think he must here be referring to religion as an idea, while religions invariably carry institutional facts and always include some form of institutions.

[27] Institutional facts are a subclass of social facts.

power in many different ways" (105).[28] In the case of religious institutions, which typically are created by involving some forms of reference to claims of superhuman/transcendental agency, the resulting dynamics are widely attested in empirical research.

A basic point of institutional reality,[29] in Searle's philosophy, is that its creation and maintenance are "intentionality-relative", which provides its specific ontology. Yet, we can discover intentionality-independent facts about this reality, and there are myriad ways in which institutional reality can create "brute" facts. Money, for example, would not work when nobody would recognize or accept it; its very existence cannot be explained without intentionality, but many facts can be discovered about it, which are mind-independent. The same is true for religion\s and religious affairs. To my eyes, this paradoxical structure of social reality needs to be acknowledged in discussions about the ontology of religion\s and religious affairs, which, of course, do not exist 'out there' as a kind of 'brute fact', but can exist as a social creation, typically sustained by practical activities such as rituals and ceremonies, as ontologically "observer dependent" (where observers are all those who are engaged in the creation of the respective reality, in the case of religion customers/believers/practitioners/theologians/scholars etc), on pair with other social and cultural creations such as nation states and currencies as long as they are accepted and recognized as such. In other words, there can be epistemic objectivity about a reality which is ontologically subjective (Searle 2010: 17-18; Searle 2006a).

IV. Non-humans

Searle's talk about the power of human intentionality can appear as counterintuitive in light of the factual character of the worlds so created. Serious ontological, epistemological and other differences notwithstanding, at this point, as a coda to this essay, it may be helpful to tentatively connect Searle's philosophy of institutional/social reality with a framework in social theory commonly known as Actor-Network-Theory (ANT).[30]

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[28] This is what puts him into sharp contrast to Marxist and to Durkheimian theorist legacies.

[29] For Searle, institutional reality is always social reality, but not every social reality creates institutional facts; all sorts of animals have social relations, but only humans have institutions.

[30] For introductions see Callon 2001; Latour 2005. The following should not be taken to imply that I endorse ANT any more than that I find it helpful to address some key issues in theories of religion. So far, I am not aware of any systematic attempt to translate ANT to the study of religion\s. If that ever were to be done, it should simultaneously address the scientific

To some extent, ANT (which should not be regarded as yet another off-shoot of postmodernism) is an offspring of the sociology of science and technology, which stirred some debate in the 1980s and 1990s. On this view, science is a particularly powerful site for the creation, or establishment, of what counts as reality. According to Bruno Latour (2005: 89), "science offered the most extreme cases of the complete *artificiality* and complete *objectivity* moving in parallel". Rather than offering a social explanation of science, the theoretical project has turned to demystifying the social which in the social sciences, often in conjunction with emancipatory agendas, is routinely traded as an explanatory entity *(explanans)* for what needs to be explained *(explanandum)* (Latour 2005: 98-102), a kind of epistemological substitute. Instead of taking the social as a kind of autonomous domain that can reasonably be taken to explain something, ANT not only underlines that the social itself is in a continuous process of composition, maintenance and re-assembling:[31] "the social has never explained anything; the social has to be explained instead" (Latour 2005: 97). Against standard social theory, Latour argues that there is no *deus ex societas*. Similarly, groups are not taken as starting points of the analysis, but rather as the end points of processes of group formation (Latour 2005: 27-42). The implications for the study of religion\s and theories of religion are apparent: religions are in a continuous process of reconstruction (see also Day this issue; Stausberg 2001), yet, at the same time religion\s cannot be simply explained as springing out of a given social context(s):[32] "If society explains religion, then society is enough" (Latour 2005: 105).

The notion of intentionality has no place in ANT, which warns against thinking that action was "a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair" (Latour 2005: 46). By definition, action is dislocated and over-taken (just as language sets the stage for speech and tools for handicraft) and as much as acting actors are made to act by others. "Action is bor-

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enterprise of studying religions and the way religions work. For some attempts to draw Latour into a study of religion\s conversation see Day (2009; and this issue). Given its origin in science and technology studies, ANT is attentive to the contribution of sciences to the making of reality (such as the impact of sociology on society), which would be an important point for the study of religion\s to take home.

[31] Scholars of religion\s might note that Latour (2005: 7) illustrates the difference between these two approaches (which he dubs the 'sociology of the social' versus the 'sociology of associations' respectively) by pointing to (an etymology of) religion: "Religion does not have to be 'accounted for' by social forces because in its very definition—indeed in its very name—it links together entities which are not in the social order."

[32] Day (2009: 732) refers to the supposed explanatory agents such as capitalism, power, culture, etc. as "ghosts" and argues that the existence of such "ghosts" reveals the illusionary character of a non-theological character of the study of religion\s.

rowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated" (Latour 2005: 46). The ANT view of agency, which among other things emphasizes the ability to make a difference, produce transformations, leave traces and can be accounted for in accounts, cannot be discussed here any further. But one of the distinctive traits of ANT as a social theory is that it affirms the agency of non-humans and the role it assigns to them, as actors, in the composition of the social—just as nonhumans are made to act in the laboratory and as the laboratory has been able to construct and reveal the transformative agency of non-humans such as microbes. The category of non-humans is an encompassing and admittedly "meaningless" one (Latour 2005: 72). Since they are at the heart of the matter, the study of religion\s is long-since familiar with this category in terms of gods, ghosts, spirits, souls, and other (super-natural, super-human, or counter-intuitive) agents (Pyysiäinen 2009). However, contrary to standard procedure in the sciences—be they social or cognitive/evolutionary, be they modernist or postmodernist—Latour does not propose yet another explanatory substitution to account for their imaginary, believed, claimed, proposed or negotiated agency but to build a theory on an affirmation of their agency (see Day this issue). He suggests that every such explanation is ultimately suspicious of the agency of these agents and faithful to its emancipatory agenda tries to explain them away by accounting for their existence. While I agree with Latour that it may be potentially rewarding for purposes of theoretical and empirical work to let such agencies 'out of their cage' (Latour 2005: 239f) just to see what happens, I remain unconvinced by the underlying epistemological antireductionism ("principle of irreduction" [Latour 2005: 107]), not the least for strategic reasons, since I am not sure whether the study of religion\s would be well advised "to follow the natives, no matter which metaphysical imbroglios they lead us into" (Latour 2005: 62).

Yet, this is not the issue here. While non-human agents such as gods and ghosts are on the one hand of the spectrum, the category of non-humans also includes a variety of other things, or what is often referred to as (material) objects, or stuff (Miller 2010). Latour, however, is critical of subject/object talk (Latour 2005: 75f), since ANT reminds us that subjectivities are to some extent always created by the objects that set the stage for the subjects to act.[33] Things clearly have agency in the ANT understanding of the term: they make a difference, produce transformation, leave traces, and enter accounts. Things are participants in courses of actions—just as there is no hammering

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[33] The cognitive dimensions of artefacts are emphasized in recent research in cognitive archaeology; see Geertz this issue. See Lynch (2010) for an object-relations-theory inspired attempt to think sacred objects as sacred subjects.

without a hammer, or no zapping a TV without a remote. Turning to religions, there are no revelations without books or places, no prayers without instruments, and there are no gods without temples, churches and lots of other things—starting with human bodies. It is the materiality of things which provides stability to the world, which relieves humans of the necessity to create the world *ex nihilo* on a daily basis: "It is always things—and I now mean this last word literally—which, in practice, lend their 'steely' quality to the hapless 'society'" (Latour 2005: 68). Besides the agentive things, material stuff helps to create a stable reality precisely by what Dan Miller terms its 'humility': "Stuff has a quite remarkable capacity of fading from view, and becoming naturalized, taken for granted, the background or frame to our behaviour. Indeed stuff achieves its mastery of us precisely because we constantly fail to notice what it does" (Miller 2010: 155).[34] In the same sense, it is things that provide the objective reality of religion which, as we have seen, is at the same time ontologically subjective and intentionality-dependent.

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[34] In metatheoretical terms this reflects a Bourdieu-inspired (Marxist) approach that considers misrecognition on the side of the agents as part of the logic of social practice.

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