Against misrepresentation in book reviewing: a response to Paul-François Tremlett’s review of Contemporary Theories of Religion (Culture and Religion, 2010/4)

At the outset, let me state the obvious. (1) I don’t think that Contemporary Theories of Religion, a book I edited in 2009, is flawless and perfect. It certainly isn’t; few, if any, books are. (2) I am quite in favour of critical reviews. They are essential for a progress in research. (3) As is the case with all research, book reviews should not misrepresent information or distort positions, regardless of the reviewer’s own views. So, I comment on Tremlett’s review in the spirit of debate. However, this response also addresses a deeper issue: challenging the underlying spirit and policy of the review. This is more serious, since Tremlett also serves as the review-editor of that journal. I would think that a review like this should not have been published in a serious scholarly journal.

Contemporary Theories of Religion: a critical companion (CTR) starts with the observation that we are living in an age of abundance with regard to theories of religion. My introductory essays specifies that all theories of religion typically address (even if not answer positively) four main questions (without excluding other questions). The introduction further distinguishes theories of religion, in that sense, from theoretical approaches to the study of religion and from theoretical ideas about religion. In a more general sense, the introduction defends a strong sense of theory by claiming that there are no data and no knowledge without theory (in a broad sense). The introduction closes with a section on fundamental challenges to the feasibility of the very project of theories of religion. Further, the book is based on the assumption that as scholars of religion, we should cultivate a critical awareness of academic theories of religion, whether produced by people from our discipline or by scholars in other fields. For this reason, the volume brings together 15 scholars of religion who discuss a body of 17 academic theories of religion that were published in the period from 1990 to 2007. In the final chapter I discuss some comparative issues that emerged across the chapters.

Tremlett’s review begins with the statement that CTR ‘is an odd book’ (433). Such a warning at the outset of a review is unusual; presenting this vague statement as an apparent conclusion based on supposedly close engagement with a complex book is problematic. Tremlett continues by raising two objections against the book: it ‘delineates an extremely narrow theory of Theory’; and the introduction attacks postmodernism ‘without actually engaging with the substance of any actual post-modern epistemological critiques whatsoever’ (433). It is unclear whether the first statement objects to my endorsement of a pervasive notion of theory (which is shared by, among other, postpositivists and critical theorists, unless they shun the very word ‘theory’) or to my definition of theories of religion. The second objection does not engage what I actually wrote and thereby unwittingly seems to confirm it: my point, made quite explicitly, was that certain developments in the field, driven by postmodernism, critical theory or post-structuralism, have gone in a direction that would make theories of religion, as defined, a meaningless endeavour from the start, and that, at present, this results in a situation of incommensurability between different discourses. This is implicitly confirmed by Tremlett’s review. However, he seems to think that one camp is right and the other is wrong, whereas I hold that no consensus or fruitful dialogue is in sight. Rather than defending one camp and merely asserting its value, CTR was brought together in the spirit of critique and dialogue. CTR aims at
spelling out the agenda and reviewing the contribution of theories of religion, as defined, and at critically discussing them on their own premises rather than at simply dismissing them as futile.

Tremlett complains about my having written that CTR “is not the place for a sociology of knowledge of theorising religion” (p. 10). Tremlett continues: ‘No reasons are given as to why. One assumes that this move serves only to insulate a certain kind of theory of Theory from certain lines of critique.’ (433) To begin with, this quote is misleading since my remark referred to the introduction and not, as Tremlett misrepresents it as saying, to the whole volume. The rest leads us back to the point made above: either one can critically engage with a certain kind of theorizing, or one can find that futile. There are reasons for both positions and one can adopt either strategy, but Tremlett’s refusal to engage with the understanding of theory that underlies CTR insulates his review from the book and appears as short on reflexivity.

Turning to the next paragraph, Tremlett states: ‘The position actually staked out with regard to what qualifies as proper, real, ‘scientific’ Theory of Religion (p. 7) turns out to have only four questions’ (433). Again, Tremlett misrepresents what I am writing: I explicitly state that there are many more questions, but that the four I have highlighted are the ones that need to be addressed if one wishes to account for religion as a whole (though, if one does not find that a meaningful thing to do, one will need to disregard this as well, of course). The word ‘scientific’ does not occur in the context suggested by Tremlett, but in a subsequent section that discusses the emergence of scientific theories as a result of the loss of given cultural certainties.

Tremlett continues by stating: ‘Oddly, Stausberg claims that arguments about the definition of religion tend to disavow this kind of theory (p. 2), yet if one examines instances of theory that claim to explain the origin or the function of religion, those theories always depend on very precise definitions of what religion is …’ (433). Tremlett again misrepresents my text, which states that, while the question of the definition of religion is routinely rehearsed by scholars of religion, theories of religion are apparently perceived as less engaging by scholars of religion. Far from contradicting me, Tremlett effectively echoes my point in an inverted form.

Tremlett’s next sentence reads: ‘Anyway, it is clear that the reader is, in a certain sense, being told what Theory is and what kinds of questions the study of religion, as a field, ought to be interested in.’ (433) This sentence is correct, and I admit that I find it a scholarly virtue to tell the readers what I am talking about, and I also find it logical that the study of religion from the meta-theoretical point of view outlined in the introduction ought to be interested in certain questions, provided that the discipline finds it meaningful to engage in theories of religion.

Tremlett’s subsequent sentence reads: ‘The reader interested in religions as sites of social action or as modes of articulation – the reader for whom no definition of religion is necessary beyond the statements and claims (i.e. the definitions) of real people – need read no further.’ (433) This comes as a surprise, for suddenly Tremlett advances his own theoretical ideas: religions are ‘sites of social action’ and/or ‘modes of articulation’. The step from a suggestive theoretical idea to a theory of religion, as outlined by my Introduction, would involve the following sorts of steps: attempting to
show why this is so, to what extent religions are distinct as sites of social action, what kind of theory of action and sociality this implies, what ‘modes of articulation’ are, how and why they are operative, what other modes of articulation exist, which theory of communication that implies, etc. My notion of theories of religion does not preclude any theoretical content (even that hinted at by Tremlett). Tremlett could have noticed that the term ‘social action’ appears in the volume and that some of the theories discussed in the volume are quite compatible with the idea he seems to be advocating.

For some reason, judging from the following sentence (‘Indeed, by the editor’s own admission, only three of the seventeen theories discussed actually have a basis in empirical research’ [p. 11]), Tremlett seems to think that if one does empirical work, religions will naturally appear as ‘sites of social action or as modes of articulation’. This strikes me as reductive and in need of explication; alternatively, both theoretical and empirical work would need to fine-tune such a statement. Furthermore, Tremlett’s representation of my ‘admission’ is somewhat distorted.

In the next para, Tremlett states that ‘the 15 essays that form the bulk of the book ... are typically short’ (434). For readers to make sense of such a statement, a reviewer should explain how short, or long, the chapters really are (as done by the MTSR-reviewer). The average length of the chapters is 7 136 words. Is that short or long? Some readers may find it short, others long, and the publisher has its own ideas about that. For Tremlett, ‘the volume’s key flaw ... [is] the restrictive constraints of space placed on the contributors’ (434). Others may prefer succinct and comprehensive discussions, and even Tremlett admits that ‘given the constraints that the contributors have been placed under, manage those constraints very well’ (434).

Next, Tremlett addresses the selection of theories. He states: ‘It seems, to this reader at least, that the process for selecting the theories for discussion was somewhat idiosyncratic. Stausberg says only that the ‘theories selected for inclusion were all presented in the form of a monograph’ (p. 9) and that they are all nontranscendentalist.’ (434) This is a yet another misrepresentation. In fact, I clearly spell out criteria for what I refer to as ‘full-fledged theories of religion’ compared to theoretical approaches and ideas (CTR 9). The distinction between transcendentalist and non-transcendentalist theories, however, is discussed in a different context, and I clearly state that CTR only discusses non-transcendentalist theories because, as far as I am aware, no relevant transcendentalist theories were produced during the relevant period (CTR 12). Tremlett criticizes ‘the volume [not] for leaving out some important theories (which it does) but rather for including too many’ (434). In principle, I find it unsound to say that something was left out without giving examples. (Ironically, note 14 to my introductory essay provides some examples.). On the other hand, Tremlett gives no reason as to why some theories should have been omitted or why the book should have addressed fewer theories of religion. Tremlett asks whether the volume could ‘have focused, rather more specifically, on contemporary cognitive theories of religion (admittedly, a field broad enough in itself)’ (434). In fact, these theories are discussed by no less than five chapters. As a result, CTR provides the most extensive discussion of this family of theories published so far by scholars of religion. (In fact, Hughes recently [MTSR 22/4 (2010), 293] commented on the great attention paid to these theories in CTR.) I also think that having these theories discussed by several highly qualified scholars can potentially provide a broader panorama than one longer discussion by one author.
My main point in this critique was not so much to defend my editorial decisions and my position outlined in my introductory essay—although none of the remarks in Tremlett’s review have persuaded me to the contrary. Rather, my critique is a note of protest against what I perceive to be unethical reviewing: I have indicated several cases of misrepresentations of the reviewed book. Moreover, I can perceive no attempt in the review to actually engage with the book, rather than to summarily dismiss it. The review does not even give CTR the credit for being the sole publication where one can find summaries, context, and critique of recent theories of religion, whatever one may think about the project of theories of religion or the particular selection of theories examined. Even if one does not like this version of theory, qualified discussions of such theories should be appreciated by every scholar of religion—given that these theories claim to be interpreting or explaining what scholars of religion are ultimately supposed to be dealing with. In this sense, I cannot help finding the review as ‘odd’ and ‘disappointing’ as Paul-François Tremlett found the book.

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