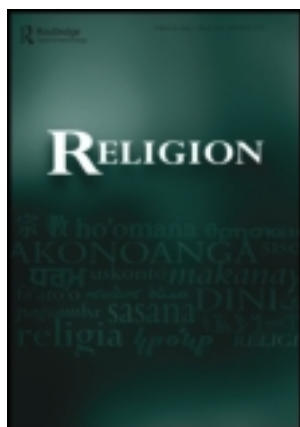


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## A new theory of religion? Introducing the review symposium on Manuel A. Vásquez: *More Than Belief* (2011)

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**ABSTRACT** This essay introduces a review symposium on *More than Belief: a Materialist Theory of Religion* (2011) by Manuel A. Vásquez. The essay outlines the context and summarizes the structure and argument of the book. The author discusses its limitation as a full-blown theory of religion and summarizes the main points of criticism advanced by the other contributions to the review-symposium.

**KEY WORDS** theory of religion; materialism; non-reductive materialism

The period since the 1990s has seen an unprecedented proliferation of new theories of religion (Stausberg 2009a) and this process does not seem to be exhausted. A recent case in point and one of the most substantial additions to the literature is *More than Belief: a Materialist Theory of Religion* (2011) by Manuel A. Vásquez, who teaches at the University of Florida, Gainesville (USA). In this review symposium, four commentators engage in a discussion of this theory. In order to contextualize their contributions, this opening essay will outline the argument of the book and ask to what extent it can be said to offer a new theory of religion.

### Contexts and birth of a theory

Most contemporary theories of religion have been produced by white American men. At least one theoretician reflects on his particular situatedness as a 'middle-aged, middle-class, Philadelphia-born white guy of Irish Catholic descent' (Tweed 2006: 18) – yet, as much as that list may reveal, nationality seems to be taken so much for granted that even a reflexive scholar of this caliber fails to acknowledge it. Both Tweed's and Vásquez' theoretical itinerary resulted from work with transnational migrants in the United States, and the latter, in the rhetorical opening reference to the moment of birth of his theory, points to his 'frustration in the classroom' that the extant theoretical canon in the study of religion's was not helpful when '[t]rying to engage students about the religious creativity, cross-fertilization, and fluidity that accompany globalization, particularly about the ways in which transnational migrants transform both their countries

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of origin and settlement by generating hybrid identities, practices, and spaces' (p. 1).<sup>1</sup> While Tweed points to a specific event and locale as the place of birth of his theory, for Vásquez (in the following: V.), who has a background in the sociology of religion (p. 13), it is the study of a particular social phenomenon. Implicitly then, throughout the book, this phenomenon serves as a yardstick to measure the adequacy of theoretical statements on 'religion.'

### Argument(s) and structure

V.'s theoretical agenda is directly built on his empirical case. Starting from the observation of 'the strongly embodied and pragmatic character of religion among immigrants' (p. 2), V. sees a need 'to de-provincialize the study of religion, to historicize and to materialize it' (p. 3). In the following, the de-provincializing and historicizing ambitions take a back seat while the focus, witness the title of the work, leans towards the materializing agenda: the book 'is an effort to explore the sources of a "materialist turn" in religious study that is already underway at the margins of the discipline' (p. 3).

In epistemological terms, V. seeks to ground this 'materialist turn' in 'a non-reductive materialist framework to study religion' (p. 4). This 'framework is non-reductive because it highlights complexity, inter-level connectivity, emergence, situated knowledge, and relative indeterminacy' (p. 5); it 'explicitly avoids the temptations of foundationalism', i.e., 'the notion that it is possible and desirable to have a god's-eye view of religion, to find its universal essence once and for all' (p. 9). The framework is materialist not in the sense of crude, naïve, or reductive mechanisms or physicalisms, but by seeking to recognize 'the material constraints and possibilities entailed by our being-in-the-world through our physical bodies' (p. 6). Following the American philosopher Joseph Margolis, V. subscribes to cultural realism; he holds that '[s]elves and cultures are material in their own right. They acquire their distinctive materiality through social practices that mediate how we experience the world' (p. 6). V. refers to 'three key sites where some of the most innovative and potentially influential non-reductive materialist work in religion is taking place' (p. 11), namely body, practice, and space. These three axes are then explored in the 11 chapters and three parts of the book. (In line with a general neglect of attention to history among many American theorists, the axis of time does not receive the same amount of attention, even though history is sometimes evoked and although he consistently addresses the history of the theoretical discourse.)

In his attempt to lay out a materialist theory, V. opts for taking 'a genealogical approach, which is simultaneously historical and epistemological' (p. 4). It is historical because he reviews the history leading to the neglect of material things in the study of religion's and traces the history of their potential recovery along the three axes of embodiment (Part I/seven chapters/187 pages), practice (Part II/two chapters/46 pages), and emplacement (Part III/two chapters/58 pages). For the most part, the genealogical approach works by V. providing concise, comprehensive, and intelligible, often superb, summaries of key theoreticians; he lays out the persuasiveness and strength of their respective positions, and then points to their blind spots, weaknesses, and limitations, which, as a rule, are then

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<sup>1</sup>All unspecified page numbers refer to Vásquez 2011.

addressed and compensated for by the next theory in the genealogical chain presented by V. in the same manner.

In the first two chapters V. casts his net widely, when he attempts to explain, or situate, the (traditional) ignorance and (recent) recovery of the body in the study of religion\’s by tracing the epistemological genealogy all the way to Greek philosophy and Christianity. Luckily, though, V. seeks to resist the temptation of a rhetoric of blame by pointing to contrasting strands and tensions. Yet, this is only the prelude for attributing the ultimate genealogical sin to Descartes and his mind-body dualism that would result in the modern (disembodied) subject and its anxieties, internalism, and idealism (Chapter one, pp. 21–41). In Chapter two (pp. 43–57), he traces two thinkers, namely Spinoza and Nietzsche, as counter-developments aiming ‘to overcome the Cartesian dualism and to construct a somatocentric non-reductive materialism’ (p. 59). In Chapter three (pp. 59–85), V. turns to philosophical phenomenologists as potential allies in this project. In particular, he discusses Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty and their potential value for the study of religion\’s turned ‘materialist.’ By way of contrast, in Chapter four (pp. 87–121), V. examines how the earlier reception of phenomenology in the study of religion\’s went wrong in that ‘transcendental subjectivism and foundational idealism in phenomenology as a philosophical movement reinforced anti-materialist and anti-somatic tendencies within the phenomenology and history of religions’ (p. 87). V. points to the paradox of ‘a phenomenology of religion that on the surface renounced Christian exceptionalism but that at its heart was still beholden to the excarnate subjectivism of Protestant Christianity’ (p. 89). Having briefly reviewed the works of Chantepie de la Saussaye, Tiele, Kristensen, van der Leeuw, Eliade, and some post-Eliadian figures (Pettazzoni, Waardenburg, Smart, W.C. Smith), V. discusses and dismisses Flood’s (1999) attempt to establish a post-phenomenological theory based on narrativity and hermeneutics. Instead, he draws attention to the work of phenomenological anthropologists such as Stoller, Jackson, and Csordas and outlines the work of two American historians of religion (Taves and L. Schmidt) whose work to some extent resonates with the kind of phenomenology of embodiment he has in mind.

In Chapter five (pp. 123–147), V. moves from phenomenology to a discussion of social constructivism(s). He begins by tracing its origins from Enlightenment philosophy, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Durkheim and thinkers who elaborated on the latter, including Mannheim, Berger, and structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and Douglas. The next sub-chapters discuss the work of Foucault (and some of its applications to the study of religion\’s – Asad, Bynum, R.M. Griffith – as well as Butler. Her work is criticized for ‘a rather thin notion of resistance’ (p. 146), a one-dimensional, ‘partial, overly linguistified materialism’ that ‘relies on a domineering anthropocentric view that insists that whatever is, is discursive and whatever is discursive, is’ (p. 147), which amounts to failing ‘to acknowledge our embeddedness in nature ... and our continuities with nonhuman animals’ (p. 147).

In seeking to pave the way for a more open-ended and polymorphous non-reductive materialism, in Chapter six (pp. 149–171) V. first engages the critical work of so-called material feminists such as Bordo, Hekman, and Barad against Butlerian-style radical constructivism. Barad’s agential realism is welcomed as one way of opening the discursive to the material and as clearing ‘the way for a fully somatocentric theory of religion’ (p. 157). Next, V. reviews the work of Deleuze and Guattari where he encounters ‘a body that, while still constructed

and de-essentialized (in the sense of not bearing a fixed, transhistorical structure like the Oedipus complex), is fully active, not just the passive effect of discourses that interpellate it' (p. 162). V. is aware that 'Deleuze and Guattari, like Fried, equate religion with unnecessary repression' (p. 162) and he seeks to re-read their work in more religion-open terms. Finally, V. looks at Haraway's attempts to get beyond human exceptionalism and to overcome culture-nature splitting by speaking of 'natural-cultural entanglements,' 'material-semiotic actors,' 'boundary-creatures,' and 'mixed organic-technological hybrids' (pp. 166f); he finds that key-elements of Haraway's and Deleuze and Guattari's projects dovetail nicely. In sum, social constructivism was justified and necessary as a critique but remains excessively anthropocentric (p. 169); it has become narcissistic and turned into 'a totalizing rhetoric' (p. 170).

Chapter seven (pp. 173–208), the final chapter of Part I, seeks to engage research from the neurosciences, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary theory as elements of his project of recovery of a non-reductionist, non-anthropocentric materialism. Once more, V. competently leads his readers alongside a chain of theorists starting with the emergence of cognitive science in the 1950s (centered on Chomsky) and the second wave, in the 1980s, under the umbrella term of connectivism and neural networks (centered on the Churchlands). He then revisits neurophenomenology and the enactive model (Varela; Varela/Thompson/Rosch), where he sees several advantages: the concept of 'transcendence-within-immanence' (echoing Deleuze and Guattari) (p. 181), the 'return to the use of first-person data' (p. 182), its focus on 'the full lived body' (p. 182) including emotions and perceptions, the opening onto practice (embodied action in addition to representations) (p. 183) and the interest in culture and history as formative processes (p. 184). In a second part of this chapter, V. summarizes main theories from the so-called cognitive science of religion and he goes on to discuss neurotheology and meme theory. While he acknowledges the capacity of the cognitive science of religion 'to hold cultural relativism in check' (p. 195), V. faults the cognitivists for their 'heavy reliance on representationalism' (p. 201); the transmission of religion involves more than mental categories and the 'sorts of agents, categories, devices, and templates that the dominant cognitive theories of religion stipulate *underdetermine* the production, circulation, and consumption of religious practices and artifacts' (p. 198); for V. diversity rather recurrence is the 'real issue' (p. 198). In what follows, V. discusses Slingerland's (2008) attempt to bridge the gap between postmodern relativism and scientist objectivism. He finds Slingerland's notions of causation and emergence too limited, for, according to the enactive model, 'culture and society enter into the dynamic interplay of bottom-up and top-down influences' (p. 204). His view of consilience leans to a more flexible definition, 'as the collaboration and convergence among various disciplines in dealing with common pressing problems' (p. 206). With regard to religion, 'the local diversity, complexity, and rich cross-fertilization of religious life' needs to be addressed as much as the 'broad ecological, genetic, and neurophysiological constraints that give rise to cross-cultural and cross-generational regularities' (p. 207). Humans are neither robots nor angels, but 'cyborgs, determined by different but networked forms of materiality' (p. 208).

Part II, on practice, is made up of two chapters. Chapter eight (pp. 211–229) presents the negative legacy carried forward by the study of religion; here V. points to three influential thinkers or schools who by promoting an excessive textualism have contributed to 'the eclipse of practice' invoked by the chapter title. The

three culprits are Geertz, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida; while he praises some of their achievements, V. mainly points out fatal flaws with their perspectives. In passing, Weber is invoked and defended and the chapter ends on a nod to Foucault who is here engaged as a protagonist for a 'research program, which has made embodied practice, not consciousness or collective representations, the point of departure for the study of religion' (p. 229).

Chapter nine (pp. 231–257) reviews 'the sources of the shift toward practice' (p. 231). For V. there are mainly three such sources: theories of ritual, historical materialisms, and practice theories, which he reviews genealogically. For ritual theory, V. swiftly guides the reader through Robertson Smith, Mauss, van Gennep, and V.W. Turner whose emphasis on play is constructed by V. as the gateway to Marx' anthropology in his 'middle' period, which 'offers a nuanced picture of humans as *Homo Faber*, as creative producers' (p. 239) in the dialectical process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Bourdieu is discussed more extensively and critically; the 'significant weaknesses' (p. 245) and limitations of Bourdieu's theory include his view of the body as a blank slate, a less than holistic 'view of practice as a dynamic interplay of neurophysiological, cultural-historical, and ecological networks' (p. 246), the lack of attention to 'the enteric nervous system' (p. 246), an overly static view of the logic of practice resulting in 'an impoverished theory of religious change' (p. 247). De Certeau's work on the practices and tactics of everyday life and Gramsci's notion of hegemony and ideology (and their later elaborations by Raymond Williams) seem to offer some promising elements of revision of Bourdieu's theory. This is followed by some sections where V. summarizes practice theory at work among religion scholars and others working on religion like James Scott, Jean Comaroff, E.P. Thompson, Iletto, Narayan, Orsi, and L. Schmidt. While even '[t]he best textual scholarship already takes a practice-oriented approach' (p. 256), for which he highlights the work of Karen King as an example, V. concludes that text is 'not the only metaphor to understand the richness of human activity,' that meaning-making and discursive practices 'must be studied in their inevitable interplay with other types of practice' and that '[p]ractice-centered approaches also explore religion in all its historicity, as a holistic process, not simply a product, of either symbolic systems or economic structures' (p. 257).

The third and final part, which seeks to 'put practice in place' and explores space as 'a core epistemological category' (p. 262), again comprises two chapters. True to his genealogical approach, in Chapter ten (pp. 261–290) V. reviews a sequence of key theorists of space in the study of religion's (and their impact on further studies) starting with Durkheim, followed by Eliade and J.Z. Smith (but without discussing Knott 2005). He then turns to a discussion of Foucault (the imperialism of the center, panoptical society, 'the constitution of religious subjects through spatialized and spatializing techniques' [276] such as confessions), whose analysis is limited by 'a totalizing, static logic' and by viewing space 'only as heteronomous' (p. 277), whereas de Certeau's theory of spatial tactics and the contested nature of social spaces seems to resonate better with the kind of analysis proposed by J.Z. Smith. V. then moves to Appadurai and related thinkers, concluding that 'religious studies scholars need to think of religion as a multi-scalar phenomenon, as dynamic discourses, practices, and deterritorializing and re-territorializing institutions that link the local and the translocal' (p. 283). He also finds Lefevre's notion of absolute space helpful to make sense of the work of religion (exemplified by a re-reading of

Gill's study of the Mother Earth concept in Native American religion). Finally, V. proceeds to a discussion of Tweed's work, which he endorses as the confluence of several theoretical developments and as 'a fully reflexive, non-reductive materialist spatial theory of religion' (p. 289) that he wants to amend by a greater focus on the issue of power, resistance, and structure.

The final and eleventh chapter (pp. 291–319), builds on and goes 'beyond Tweed's hydrodynamics of religion by taking a closer look at mobility and embeddedness' (p. 292). He begins by warning that the present literature on globalization has overemphasized mobility and flow instead of boundaries, closure, and inequalities. He proposes to redress this shortcoming by introducing the relational tropes of a networks approach. In order to 'specify the morphologies that religious networks adopt' (p. 302), V. suggests adapting commodity-chain analysis to define access and power dynamics in networks and the historical developments of particular linkages in the contexts of nation-states, the media, and the (neo-liberal) economy. He focuses 'on networks as a way to underline the fact that religions on the move entail the activity of specific individuals and groups that are located in and connected through shifting but binding differentials of power. Although networks are deterritorializing ... they are always territorialized and prone to hierarchization' (p. 310). Since 'the literature on place-making in the humanities and the social sciences has tended to sweep [sic!] the part of "nature" that refers to the ecological webs and geophysical realities with which our bodies are tightly intertwined under the catch-all term of "landscape"' (p. 311), in the final part of this chapter V. turns to ecology. Aiming to overcome anthropocentrism, which often haunts the notion of landscape, V. briefly reviews the works of the theologian Belden Lane and Rappaport (whose views carry 'heavy teleological assumptions' [p. 314]). From the psychologist of perception James J. Gibson he takes the notion of affordances, the ecological 'spatial and spatiotemporal properties' furnished by things or the environment to the observers (p. 315). Beyond the limitations of constructivisms and cognitivism, ecology helps us taking 'into account what the environment affords our bodies' (p. 317). The sacralization of space, for example, is 'an interplay among multiple materialities: social construction and the environment afford each other' (p. 317). With Ingold, V. holds that ecology is not something external but 'part of an integrated process of being-with and being-in-the-world' (p. 318). The 'body is simultaneously crisscrossed by ecological networks operating at multiple levels and in-skillled by a socially mediated habitus' (p. 318). V. concludes: 'The scholar of religion who takes ecology seriously avoids reductionisms, semiotic or not, and takes into account the multiple, intra-active forms of materiality that make possible those experiences, practices, artifacts, and institutions practitioners and scholars call religion' (p. 319).

In his epilogue ('By the Way of a Conclusion' [pp. 321–328]) V. restates his main agenda and situates his work within Taylor's 'immanent frame.' While the commitment to immanence restricts the appeal to supernatural or supra-historical forces or entities (p. 323), the immanent frame at the same time 'has to be open, meaning that transcendence must be intrinsic to it' (p. 324). His materialism 'cannot but subscribe to naturalism when it comes to religion and culture' (p. 325). Against critics of the category of religion, V. adopts an 'eminently pragmatic' position (p. 325). The 'category no longer belongs to us (if it ever did!)' and 'it is naïve to think that by simply getting rid of the category

through discursive reconstruction and genealogical analysis, all epistemological and methodological problems will fade' (p. 326).

### A new theory of religion or a theoretical roadmap?

This somewhat extended summary has given the readers some idea of the vast theoretical terrain mapped by V. in *More than Belief*. Not only is his wide reading impressive, but even more so his ability to provide concise and generally quite balanced and readable summaries of theories and to put several of these theories in creative dialogue with each other. It is rare to find a theoretician drawing on such a variety and diversity of theoretic discourses; few, if any, would have dreamed of creating an alliance between, for example, feminism and evolutionary theorizing.

Given the immense horizons V. seeks to cover, most readers will be able to come up with suggestions for further reading that could have enriched the argument of the book. Some readers will probably find the engagement with some theories to be too cursory; others will maybe complain that some scholars are mainly addressed in a genealogical context and thereby put under the yoke of a specific train of thought, which may miss out on other relevant contributions the particular theoretician might have made. From a didactical point of view, moreover, teachers are probably well advised to supplement the text by providing at least excerpts from the texts discussed by V.

*More than Beliefs* proposes a theory based on and seeking to defend non-reductive materialism. Whereas V. plants a huge garden that exudes an irresistible non-reductive materialist fragrance, the entrance to that garden, i.e., the very notion of non-reductive materialism, remains somewhat vague and under-theorized, both as a composite and with respect to the two conjoined elements. To begin with, the composite can seem like an oxymoron. *Prima facie*, one can wonder how an approach can claim to be non-reductive when it is committed to a project that reduces ontology and epistemology to materialism; how can one claim to go against 'nothing but' statements typical for strong, ontological reductionism (pp. 2–3) and at the same time commit to a position such as materialism that is *per se* defined as a 'nothing but' position (namely: 'the theory or belief that mental phenomena are nothing more than, or are wholly caused by, the operation of material or physical agencies,' as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it) and thereby carries ontological reductionism as part of its program? If this were possible (and maybe/probably it is), V. should have made that explicit in a project he flags as 'epistemological' in ambition. Providing only negative statements is insufficient to address the epistemological issues. While it comes across rather conciliatory to state that 'a well-conceived materialism is ... humbly agnostic about the "supernatural" sources of religion,' the continuation of that sentence seems to say exactly the opposite: 'but it is interested in the conditions that made it possible for these sources to be recognized and felt as supernatural' (p. 5). In other words: We do not say anything about the possible supernatural sources of religion apart from saying that there are material sources that make the potential recognition and experience of such sources possible in the first place, which is to make an ontological statement. While I entirely agree with this statement, I find it questionable to label such an approach as non-reductionist. What V. seems to challenge here is not reductionism, but eliminativism, i.e., the idea that the supernatural does not exist.



To this reader, his notion of materialism remains rather vague and implicit at best. He provides the following characteristic: 'I call this framework materialistic because it approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels' (p. 5). To my eyes, this amounts to merely stating the obvious for religion scholars doing empirical work, but what exactly turns this into a materialist framework? V. hopes that non-reductive materialism 'avoids the temptations of foundationalism' (p. 9), but he does not explain why non-reductive materialism is better suited for that purpose than other philosophies. He also speaks of the 'powerful material consequences' (p. 5) of practitioners' appeals to the supernatural, as if this would commit one to any kind of epistemological, metaphysical, or ontological position; nor does acknowledging the importance of the body, things, space, etc. necessarily lead one into the acceptance of non-reductive materialism. Although Margolis (1978) makes a case for non-reductive materialism, the reasons for this become by no means transparent by the way in which V. invokes Margolis' work on cultural realism (2001). In addition, the shift from a preoccupation with the sacred to concerns of power evoked by Asad (2003) and quoted approvingly by V. does not constitute a proper argument for materialism. While V. genealogically traces the development of dualism and the emergent views that transcend it to explain the lack of attention paid to material aspects of religion in earlier scholarship, the philosophical case for materialism in epistemological, metaphysical, or ontological terms is not stated in any coherent or compelling way. To my eyes, it is not sufficient to distance his 'non-reductive materialism' from 'reductive physicalism or naive mechanicism' (p. 6) without putting a more positive clarification of that notion on the table.

I have no desire to argue against a materialist position as such. But as V. aims at an epistemological argument, I wish he had engaged with the quite extensive debates about materialism that have haunted contemporary philosophy (see, e.g., Baker 2009; Moser and Trout 1995). Even though materialism or physicalism (the two terms are most often used interchangeably) may in a wider sense be considered mainstream philosophy<sup>2</sup>, it is in no way undisputed. Many major philosophers have rejected materialism, and there now is an increasing number of thinkers who do so (see Koons and Bealer 2010 for a selection of major voices). Likewise non-reductive materialism, which is one influential form of materialism<sup>3</sup>, has not been unchallenged in contemporary (materialist) philosophy; it has even been dubbed a myth by an influential critic (Kim 1989) and a recent review article finds that 'the history of attempts to formulate versions (of weakly or strongly) non-reductive physicalism is a history of failure' (Melnik 2008: 1282). Now, which position may be more convincing is not the matter here, but any theorist of religion who places the notion of non-reductive materialism center stage (as V. does) would be expected, I

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<sup>2</sup>As Moser and Trout in the Preface to their reader put it: 'Materialism is now the dominant systematic ontology among philosophers and scientists' (Moser and Trout 1995: ix). Critics would call its position hegemonic.

<sup>3</sup>A minimal scheme for non-reductive materialism comprises three theses: '(1) There are mental properties that are distinct from any physical properties'. ... (2) Mental properties depend on physical properties. ... (3) Mental properties make a contribution to what happens' (Baker 2009: 110–111). Different versions of non-reductive materialism supplement these theses by further arguments and different varieties imply different elucidations of these theses (such as the exact meanings of 'depend on' in thesis two and 'make a contribution to' in thesis three).

think, to set out the parameters of that debate and to position himself within it, to define clearly what he means and on which grounds he endorses such a position beyond the appeal it may have for resonating with what one may or may not observe in any given religious field.

This brings me to the general question of the extent to which *More than Belief* can be said to provide a theory of religion in a stricter sense rather than being a corpus of theoretical statements on religion. When speaking about the origin of the book, in addition to sharing his classroom frustration (see above) V. states: 'I originally proposed to Oxford University Press a broad survey of current literature focusing on embodied and emplaced religion, ranging from practice-centered approaches influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, to those dealing with religious space and place, postcolonialism, virtual religion, commodity fetishism, and material and popular culture. The goal was to offer graduate students an accessible map of the evolving field' (p. 10). But writing a roadmap of a theoretical field and proposing a new theory of religion are two different things. Ultimately, *More than Belief* seems to exemplify the first. For that purpose, the genealogical approach employed by V. seems like a reasonable strategy. For a theory of religion, however, a different kind of architecture would seem more compelling, namely one based on straightforward argument and coherent evidence. Where V. masterfully outlines the weaknesses and strengths of a selection of theories on a selection of topics, their contradictions and potential mutual engagements, the very selection of these hot topics (embodiment, practice, space) is grounded in a rather vague appeal to some kind of 'materialist' agenda.

The limits of *More than Belief* as a straightforward new theory of religion becomes clear when one measures it against the questions that, as I have argued elsewhere (Stausberg 2009b: 3–6; see similarly Geertz 2010), one would expect such a theory to answer: the specificity, origin, function, and structure of religion. While *More than Belief* has many reflections on the latter three questions to offer through its analysis of the literature, these are not addressed squarely. On the first question, however, the book has surprisingly little to say. V. seems to know what religion is, when he addresses the constraints imposed on religious by a series of factors (from the body to ecological systems), but he does not care to make that explicit. I am here not so much referring to a matter of definition (which V. does not provide either) but to the question of what is distinctive about (what we call) religion, its recurrent features or regularities. Most of the processes V. addresses can be said to be relevant for culture in general, but when he insists on their relevance for religion he should also provide an account for why these are relevant for religion in particular, which presupposes a definition (as a means of delimiting the subject area) and results in a theory of religion.

### The contributions to the symposium

My reflections on the difference between a theory of religion and a theoretical roadmap for the study of religion's are echoed by Steven Engler who raises doubts as to whether the genealogy presented by V. offers a sufficient argument for the proposed theory or theoretical approach. In addition, Engler points to the dichotomic, selective, strategic and rhetorical design of V.'s genealogies, and he argues that the book does not succeed in its stated aim of providing a robust epistemology for a non-reductive materialist study of religion's. Genealogy can tell a

good story – and a persuasive one to the already converted – but it does not necessarily present a persuasive argument. For Engler, *More than Belief* offers ‘a very broad meta-theoretical stance rather than setting out a specific theory’ (Engler 2012).

Similarly, for Mark Gardiner the genealogical strategy goes along with a lack of independent and autonomous reasoning that alone would have supported his theoretical agenda. Gardiner applauds V. for his ability to show how the position he advocates ‘harmonizes and converges with important recent research being conducted in such diverse fields as biology, neuro-psychology, and ecology’ (Gardiner 2012). In his contribution, Gardiner suggests another point of meta-theoretical coincidence, namely with Donald Davidson’s semantic holism. Gardiner proposes that this position, on a theoretical level, if adopted by V., would lend ‘evidential support’ for and would bolster ‘the rational plausibility’ of his attempted theory of religion (Gardiner 2012).

Reviewing the history of the career of concerns with embodiment, Martha Finch finds that the materialist turn advocated by V., at least from the perspective of a historian of North American religion, has been ‘front and center’ (Finch 2012) for quite some time now and does not merely exist at the margins of the discipline as claimed by V. (p. 3). Given his emphasis on networks, Finch proposes another potential felicitous meta-theoretical coincidence, namely with actor-network theory, in particular the work of Bruno Latour. This theory, as shown on a theoretical level by Day (2010) or on an ethnographical level by Piette (1999), would also offer greater space to ‘divine beings’ for a non-theological theory of religion. Finch reminds us that ‘[n]ot only humans “have” bodies. Non-human animals, objects, even the gods matter, have material existence and effective force’ (Finch 2012). Actor-network theory might even help to re-conceive the material quality of religion (see also Stausberg 2010): ‘Like devotees and their factish gods, we recognize that “religion” is a category we have fabricated, an artifice, yet when materialized within a tangible network of (embodied) scholars, the people, places, and practices they study, computers, academic conferences, journals, books, royalties, merit pay, and so on and on, it could be that “religion,” like bodies and gods, is real’ (Finch 2012).

Paul Christopher Johnson also points to Latour as one way of advancing the agenda of *More than Belief*, because a history of science perspective ‘would suggest that entities like nature, ecology, or cognition are specific to the instruments we apply to their measuring, both sensory and technological. A material history of material religion might inquire, then, why “networks” ... seems an apt descriptor for religion at *this* particular time-space conjuncture’ (Johnson 2012 [original emphasis]) and why materiality and the body have become so important in this specific historical situation. This would add a further reflexive layer to the act of theorizing. Johnson also takes issue with V.’s genealogical approach, his attempt to both show ‘the irreparable contradictions in past works *and* prove that recuperating this genealogy is important’ (Johnson 2012). For Johnson ‘the question remains, what is gained by engaging the long history of ideas about materiality?’ For all his praise of V.’s virtuosity, Johnson finds fault with his treatment of Clifford Geertz whom, Johnson argues, V. should have invoked as ‘another ancestral benefactor’ rather than as a fall guy.

Laura Harrington challenges the consistency of V.’s program and its execution, in particular the balance between the constructivist and the naturalist poles in his

non-reductive argument. Her test case is V.'s treatment of neurophenomenology. Harrington argues that V. falls short on the constructivist side of his argument by uncritically referring to neurophenomenological research without being concerned with the various implications of neurophenomenology (and its Buddhist inspiration) in the American context. Where Harrington points out that 'neurophenomenology's ideal subjects are not disembodied, de-politicized collections of highly trained grey matter producing neutral data for scholarly consumption' (Harrington 2012), she finds that V.'s discussion of neurophenomenology ironically has no traces of the embodied, emplaced materiality of this kind of scholarly practice. In other words, the much-trumpeted reflexivity is difficult to sustain in theorizing.

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