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Method and Theory in the U.K.

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Abstract

In this review, I will bring in my own experiences and observations of teaching method and theory in the United Kingdom before responding to some of the papers in *Theory in a Time of Excess*.

Keywords

Method and Theory, United Kingdom, Religious Studies

Since 1985, NAASR has generated rich debates concerning the academic study of religion in the North American context where the AAR looms large. In Europe, the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), along with its national associations, did not have to articulate its differences in the same way, apart from highlighting its non-confessional focus, until now. We watch the development of the European Academy of Religion emerging from Bologna, Italy, with some unease, especially as it claims to model itself on the AAR whilst ignoring that the AAR is, like the EASR, a member of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), which also emphasizes non-confessional approaches. It is too early to say how this will impact the EASR. For the moment, I do not think the EASR will react by becoming more discerning in the papers it accepts, since it is national associations that largely organize its conferences and review proposals.

In this review, I will bring in my own experiences and observations of the study of religion in the United Kingdom before responding to some of the papers in this volume. As Aaron Hughes indicates in his introduction, the 'excess' referred to is the preponderance of job applicants that state having a specialism in Method and Theory (MT), which would be fine, says Hughes, if method and theory was informing these scholars' research and teaching, but this is rarely the case. In the UK,

MT rarely appears in job adverts, despite most undergraduate programs including a module on this in the first or second year of a Religious Studies degree. Usually institutions advertise for an area specialism, e.g. in 'Islam'.

In the UK, the MT module (course) tends to be taught separately and alongside a 'survey of religions' module in undergraduate Religious Studies programs. Smith appears to have experienced something similar in her graduate training when she points out that it was assumed they would know 'what to do with method and theory coursework, despite the fact that that nugget of information remained unspoken' (182). However, the relation between method and theory modules to other ones is not always clear to students if we do not put them together in our teaching. Yet if integrated into other modules, method and theory might be in danger of being left out altogether, as it is far easier to 'describe religions'. Nevertheless, as a separate subject, MT remains abstract and something to be dealt with and left behind once the study of religions 'proper' begins (which is how some staff and students view MT).

The program at my institution, like others in the UK, was designed to follow this pattern. When I arrived at Leeds Trinity to teach 'world religions' (as per the job description), I became frustrated with this model. This, along with the problem of Religious Education in schools, led me to write the article 'The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change' (Owen 2011). Since then I have managed to drop 'world' from the titles of our religion modules and it was only recently that I was able to abandon completely the world religions paradigm in the first-year survey module, taking a more thematic approach.

Contributors to *Theory in a Time of Excess* have had similar frustrations, not only when teaching the subject, but also with the dominant approaches found at meetings of the American Academy of Religion. The essays in this volume offer

critical perspectives on the field, especially that as represented by the AAR. Much like NAASR conference sessions on which this book is based, each section begins with a lead paper followed by a few others and a reply by the author of the lead paper. It is well thought out and allows the reader to consider one set of papers at a time.

In the introduction, Hughes sets out the problem of scholars listing MT as a specialism when they do not take it seriously in their own research and their data remains untheorized, instead getting ecumenical theology (a critique also made by Timothy Fitzgerald in 2000). Since theory now appears meaningless, we need to qualify it with 'critical' theory (Hughes, 2). Hughes also highlights the mistrust of theory in Religious Studies and the notion of 'post-theory', such as the study of 'lived' or 'material religion', which goes back to the business of describing religions without stating why they are identified as religions. This appears to be a repackaged phenomenology of religion (as McCutcheon points out, too, in his *Afterward to the volume*, 193). This is a trend in UK scholarship, too. However, scholars here researching 'lived' or 'material religion' are at least examining boundaries between what is and is not called religion (e.g. Harvey 2013).

The rest of the essays in *Theory in a Time of Excess* are subdivided into five parts. Part I consists of a single essay written over ten years ago by Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe concerning the founding and purpose of NAASR on the occasion of its 20th anniversary, born out of a frustration with the AAR, which had fallen 'into the arms of religiously oriented interests' (14). In Europe, theological associations are separate from those that study religion, but we face this issue within our university departments often dominated by theologians. Nevertheless, the IAHR has had to emphasize it is 'not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns' (IAHR 2018), replicated in statements by the EASR and some national associations

within Europe, yet still papers slip through that might be considered confessional in their approach or tending toward religious advocacy. In 2005, Martin and Wiebe became hosts of the IAHR with an explicit agenda toward studying 'religion' as a human construction. After all, it was the IAHR that Martin and Wiebe had turned to when founding NAASR as a regional association. Now that the AAR is itself a regional association, one of NAASR's reasons for forming is gone, but its core purpose remains: to offer a space for theoretical discussions of religion.

The opening essay by Martin and Wiebe sets the theme for the rest of the volume, which begins with a cautionary. In the lead essay of Part II, Blum warns against incessant self-critique or reflexivity, which might dissolve the object of study, and aims to point out the limitations of theory. To me it seems uncontroversial that theories are imperfect (22). I think the issue I have with Blum's essay is his assumption that theory is explanatory and could be 'wrong' (24). I would rather say that propositions could be wrong, but theories by their very nature are exploratory rather than explanatory. Whether or not so-called empirical descriptions are accurate or not is not due to the theory being 'wrong', but the guiding assumptions.

Altman's response paper picks up Blum's ambivalence toward theory and questions whether the theory and object are indeed separate entities (32). If the object dissolves, it wasn't there to begin with because: 'Theory is also how we decide what our object of study is' (33). Altman also thinks Blum has a narrow view of theory as explanation and assumes the object exists independently, needing accurate description.

Blum's response (52) says he *does* assume there is a world out there, but not 'religion'. There is 'stuff' out there but, in an example Russell McCutcheon introduced to me some time ago, whether we call a tomato a fruit or a vegetable depends on the criteria we create and its purpose, e.g. for taxation. The problem with

'religion', like other social categories, is that they are defined according to the invested interests of particular groups, including scholarly ones.

The volume moves on to the object of study next in part III. In Merinda Simmons' lead essay, I do wonder who is being targeted as the 'scholars of religion' who have not taken on poststructuralism (59). I think more recent Religious Studies graduates, especially those who have taken it to Master's level, would have been on a rather poor course if they did not come across poststructuralist critiques and taken at least some of it on board. However, Simmons does touch on one of the key problems – theologians do not care what theorists of religion are up to.

At my university, as the only Religious Studies scholar, I've tried to make it possible for our students to avoid too much theology in their program by making available Humanities options, otherwise their options were overwhelmingly those that were part of a Catholic-oriented Theology degree: philosophy, ethics, biblical studies, church history and Christian doctrine. The challenge is even greater since the university merged the two degrees together into Theology and Religious Studies because all along they did not see the difference. Recently, a humanities colleague was shocked when I said I might just take my RS modules and move them into Media, Film and Culture and that RS had more in common with that program than theology.

I agree with Simmons when she critiques the emphasis on embodiment, lived experience and material religion as sleights of hand that appear to be regarding religion as a rhetorical strategy while getting down to descriptions of a religion they have already identified (63). She points out a problem that is also found in UK undergrad courses - the separation of theory from subject. While upper level modules do often manage to succeed in foregrounding theoretical approaches, the first-year modules do indeed keep them separate. Most universities offer modules that provide

an 'in-depth' study of a particular 'religion' in further years, but we are unable to do this at my institution (apart from one module on Christian doctrine), with so few staff. The positive aspect of this is that we can focus on methods and theories (at least in the religious studies modules). This does mean I have to warn my students about expectations of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for teaching Religious Education in schools. At interviews for the PGCE they may be asked to name the '5 Ks' of the Sikhs or who founded Christianity (these are actual questions my students have been asked). I usually get students to analyze 'world religion' textbooks to encourage them to engage critically with RE if they do go into teaching in schools.

While schools in the UK still rely on a phenomenological model for Religious Education, the academic study of religion has not necessarily left it behind but rather found new ways of employing it under a different guise, such as 'material religion'. Martha Smith Roberts, in her response to Simmons, takes on the 'new materialism', which is in need of sustained critique. As she points out, at its best it does address power-relations between scholars and their objects of study (68). However, 'the emphasis on experience, materiality, and embodiment as the final word', and its privileging of insider accounts, still treats religion as a given (70). This would depend on where the study begins – with the already identified religious body or object, or somewhere else such as the discourse. Otherwise, to me, it is phenomenology of religion all over again.

Part IV begins with Claire White's essay on 'What cognitive science of religion is and is not'. In some ways, this theoretical approach is more of a threat than theology to the critical study of religion because it begins with similar assumptions as phenomenology of religion. My main issue with the cognitive science of religion (CSR) is, if 'there is no singular naturally occurring phenomenon that constitutes

religion', then what are they studying? White says it takes as a starting point 'what we term religious' (98), but whose term is it, the scholar's? If so, it is taking 'religion' as a given, much like the new materialism. Matt Sheedy's response touches on this issue to some extent by citing Bloch's critique of CSR's emphasis on 'religion/supernatural' that leaves out contextual elements (123).

I have concerns about philosophical approaches to religion in general, not only phenomenology, as they tend to wipe out critical and empirical approaches in favor of an analytical style of argumentation. Philosophy of religion has been gaining ground in UK universities, sometimes replacing religious studies (philosophers have been hired as Religious Studies lecturers rather than RS graduates). Thus, I'm relieved to find that Bagger, though in the subfield of 'philosophy' (Hughes, 9), is not approaching 'theory of religion' from that angle. In his lead essay to Part V, he critiques the history of religions approaches that tend toward 'uncritical apologetics' (139-140) and advocates theoretical pluralism, the view that we should not rely on one theoretical paradigm, and to view religious studies as a field rather than a discipline (140). This does mean it is more like an area study, which has its own dangers (religion, much like 'literature' or 'history', might be taken as a given in such courses), but critiques of the category ought to be expected as part of the course.

Part VI includes a final essay by Leslie Dorrough Smith followed by an Afterward by Russell McCutcheon. Like Smith, I've been thinking of categories as brands, too, and how this generates capital (179). Method and Theory has become a brand and, like other brands, the thing itself has become lost (180). The greatest danger, highlighted by Smith (180), is: if method and theory have become compartmentalized it becomes like an area study that some people don't do (hence on CVs people list it alongside other area specialisms. Often job applicants might list it as a specialism because they took a module on it and can outline various scholars'

theories, e.g., Durkheim's, without integrating them into their own research. One problem is that hiring committees do not care - if they say they can teach it, that is all that matters. It is one of those modules they often give to new staff because no one else really takes it seriously or they find it bothersome because they are not explicit about theory in their own research. When I was an undergrad, I think one lecturer said methods and theories were reductions, and presented phenomenology of religion as non-reductive, which of course is impossible. Reductions, in this case, were viewed as bad for religion, obscuring the believers' view, and it was the job of religious studies to allow the phenomena to speak, as it were.

I would not say, as Smith does, that method and theory are regarded as trinkets (180) or a bauble (182), but in my observation MT has been viewed more as an ordeal one has to endure before getting down to the business of studying religions; it is the *fast* before the *feast*. When I first taught MT as a stand-alone module, it was mainly about category analysis and included what I would call the trinkets and baubles to attract a student's eye – ‘religions’ as the sugar to make the medicine go down. It must be kept in mind that in the UK, method and theory is taught to first or second year undergrads, not postgrads (though postgrad courses sometimes include a more specialized method and theory module). However, the three points listed by Smith (182) are similar to my experience of the undergraduate level in the UK: the method and theory module did often mean theory with very little on method, and a student could pass the module and then not have any more to do with methods and theories again (in many but not all cases – many of us continue to teach them in all our modules). In one of my final year modules I include site visits. Colleagues have sometimes suggested that I move the module to first year, to attract students to Religious Studies, not realizing that it is heavily driven by methods and theories and goes the furthest toward breaking down the sacred/profane and religion/not religion

dichotomy. Also, if students did site visits in first year, there would be a danger that the experiential aspect would dominate rather than critical observation and analysis. I agree that theories treated as historical artefacts (186), e.g. examining Freud's theory as outdated without applying his analysis on a contemporary case, is a common problem with MT type courses. This leads to a mistrust of critical theory as deconstruction without being constructive.

Like Smith, I have also heard that focusing on 'theory' was not going to get you a job, while pursuing a specialism in a narrow topic on a 'religion' would. After interviews for various posts before my present one, I was informed that I came second after a candidate with a 'world religion' specialism, despite the glaring need to hire someone who could teach across a range of subjects. I don't think Method and Theory is a fad, but more like the end of innocence Smith refers to (188). We can no longer pretend there is something called 'religion' that is 'out there' waiting to be described accurately without first acknowledging the role of the scholar in identifying it as such.

In the UK, critical analysis in the study of religion has been encouraged by the current committee of the BASR, which will hopefully encourage it in the field generally – if Religious Studies doesn't die out first. Unfortunately, it is an ever-shrinking subject area where only one or two staff members remain and the scholars who specialized in a single tradition have retired. Perhaps the old narrow specialism is now seen as a hindrance – would they be able to teach everything, as I found myself doing, including Church History and the Introduction to the Old Testament, if they only know about Islam? The great thing about theories and methods is that they can be applied to just about anything. However, almost every job advert still asks for a specialism in a particular religion, which is leading to the death of RS as a subject in the UK.

McCutcheon rounds off the volume nicely with how the journal MTSR developed plus some pertinent remarks, e.g. 'more people need to be aware *that they've been theorists all along*, even when they're simply describing the world around them,' because they 'operate with a set of assumptions about what religion is and does.' In his example of mugs and fridge magnets in his office, one item doesn't stand out all by itself, it doesn't have agency, but it becomes 'an item of discourse' because of the student's own interests (193). I still get students saying their methodology is reading library books when I try to tell them that is not a methodology. I ask them: why those books? This pushes them to work backwards to figure out why they were drawn to certain books and not others.

When reading *Theory in a Time of Excess*, no matter one's position, it demands that we reflect on how we teach method and theory and whether we are as explicit in our theories as we ought to be. The volume could end with a recommended bibliography of further reading, including publications by the contributors that might model their arguments or offer ideal examples in the study of religion. Although Hughes introduces the volume by saying each lead author comes out of a different discipline, it is not always easy to tell, e.g. Blum is described as a historian of religion but begins with an anthropological joke and writes about philosophical concerns for truth and meaning. Nevertheless, this book is 'good to think with' and I hope scholars of religion who do not explicitly engage with method and theory give this a read, without dismissing the contributors as being 'in the theory camp'.

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