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2020 | Chapter in an Edited Volume | Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

available at <https://doi.org/10.18452/22963>

Final version published as:

Gerhard van den Heever: "Beyond the Insider—Outsider Perspective: The Study of Religion as a Study of Discourse Construction". In: Religion in Motion: Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and Discourse in a Globalizing World. Edited by Julian Hensold, Jordan Kynes, Philipp Öhlmann, Vanessa Rau, Rosa Coco Schinagl, Adela Taleb. Cham: Springer, 2020, pages 141–164. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-41388-0_9



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der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Beyond the Insider—Outsider Perspective: The Study of Religion as a Study of Discourse Construction

Gerhard van den Heever*

Abstract: This essay reflects on contemporary theorizing of religion which embodies an explicit critique of the imperial project, seeing that by most common consent the scholarly disciplinary field of religious studies (history of religion, phenomenology of religion, Religionswissenschaft) is a late nineteenth century invention that coincides with the emergence of anthropology and ethnography as epiphenomena of the colonial project (whether as Orientalism or as exoticism the Other is rendered manageable subjects). The scholarly study of religion is, therefore, simultaneously a study of the history of theory and concept formation, and the social, cultural, and political work performed by such study and theorizing. The metatheory of the study of religion is a main focus of the essay. Alongside that, the essay focuses more pointedly on the concept of discourse, and considers the extraordinary situation where the same methodological vocabulary that functions in religious studies also functions in critical theological studies, which relativizes the division of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives. Yet both are conventionally practised either in isolation from each other as distinct theoretical and disciplinary bounded/defined study fields, or—the other and almost direct opposite—religious studies being performed in the context of theological study, situated in and offered by theological faculties. An overview of recent debates in the field of religious studies serves to highlight the continued struggle to demarcate the boundaries between the study of religion and the study of theology—in some of the recent, very strident debates mainstream religious studies is labelled as nothing more than theology. This contribution, then, aims at a kind of metatheoretical reflection on the study of religion and theology both as discourses that serve mythmaking, identity formation, culturally strategic purposes. That is, from the discourse perspective that is proposed here, it is possible to move beyond the definitional divide between religious studies and theology—even beyond ‘religion’ itself—to focus on the mundanely material practices that constitute that which is called religion. In the way in which the terms are used it is clear that the terminologies themselves bear the imprint of historical social discourses that occasioned the rise of their use. This essay, then, is something of a metacritique of the language of the study of religion—beyond religion, and beyond the study of religion and theology.

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Introduction

The rich tapestry of discourse that is theorizing religion has in recent years bifurcated into two main oppositional discourses and scholarly position-taking that can be conveniently summed up in the following shorthand phrases of insider–outsider problematics in the study of religion, and the phenomenology of religion versus Foucaultian critical discourse analysis. Tangentially related to these, but nevertheless an implied associated core thematic in the debate inflecting the broadly opposing theoretical discourses on religion and the study of religion, are issues regarding the purpose of university education and scholarship (and higher levels of schooling in cogitation and intellection in the humanities in general), the sociology of knowledge, and the political nature of scholarship (the meaning of activist scholarship or organic intellectuals and its ideological commitments) as the field domains in which this position-taking is playing out. While the issue I am aiming to illuminate has been around since the founding of what came to be called the science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*),¹ the last number of years have seen the rise of a particularly strident tone in the differentiation of viewpoints and imaginings of academic purposes and the value of commitments between, say, a representative large section of scholars across various programme units of the American Academy of Religion (AAR; and its sister organization, the Society of Biblical Literature, SBL) vis-à-vis positions characteristic of the majority of the membership of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). It goes without saying, but perhaps bears repeating here, that because the membership of these organizations is not limited to scholars from North America and Europe, the type of debates raging in these scholarly circles do obtain a paradigmatic character such that these bifurcated discourses are useful to think with in other contexts as well.

Starting with a Case Study

The kinds of debates referred to above have been documented well in the literature on the study of religion and I will not rehearse the literary history of the debates, apart from citing some relevant pointers to latch my reflection on to. The scholarly conflicts centre on attitudes towards the study of religion that sees scholarship as a kind of extension of religious values and religious behaviour, and therefore inflected by religious commitments. This raises, further, the wider question of the positional relationship that should obtain between the scholar of religion and the people, their practices and their traditions that s/he studies—a matter I will return to below. This question also relates to the way in which the purpose of

¹ The rise of the study of religion as a scientific discipline in the later nineteenth century also stood in oppositional contrast vis-à-vis mainstream Christian cultural and theological self-definition; the search for a transcendental, transcultural and transethnic “religious world view and ethic” had as its core value the relativizing of Christian theological world views in favour of a view of religion as the object of study as well as a human practice, as one of a category of human transcendentals, that is, in its decontextualized and departicularized version a shared essential feature of human existence across all possible divisions between humans, whether these are cultural, social, class or ethnic.

scholarship and academic work, including the purpose of religious studies as well as the social and moral value of the study of religion, is conceived.

The Purpose of Scholarship on Religion

The general tenor of academic discourse across the majority of programme units of the AAR (I would argue, and there is a substantial body of criticism existing on this) is perceived to be a theological current running through the practice and definition of academic study on religion in the AAR.² A very recent case in point is the published 2014 AAR presidential address by Laurie Zoloth.³ Zoloth, a bioethicist, drew on the challenges posed by catastrophic climate change to argue for scholarly activism in the face of the coming crisis as a moral imperative in order to advocate in our scholarly work as well as to practice the interruption of the continued exploitative devastation wrought on nature by our capitalist lifestyles. For Zoloth, scholarship stands as an extension of the religious visions of the literature and practices scholars of religion study. Hence the following injunctions to the scholarly audience:

Third we must think and then teach as scholars of religion. For does not the question of the other, the one has not arrived in a lucky place, emerge from our own scholarship? Is not that the point of knowing that the stranger, widow, and orphan are at the door, that the mendicant needs alms, that the land needs a year of release? We must live as if ready, say the texts we teach, we must live as if we were chosen to uphold the Law, to be the persons who come in love, who ask even about the city of Sodom. ... Letting the danger, the power, and the endless mercy of religion be excellently told is the task of the scholar of religion. To teach religion excellently is to engage in “the public examination of things,” the task of the scholar since Socrates spoke truth to his Academy, notes Arendt, “which doubtless spread uncertainty about established customs and beliefs.” And our teaching, if it is actually parrhesia, should raise the questions that will doubtless interrupt the usual way of things, which in our Academy would mean disruption of the institutions that govern us in the absence of a vivid, democratic, civil participation. Finally, we have a duty as scholars that emerges from the blunt fact that in scriptural texts we think important, the point is made over and over again: your moral activities can affect the rain, the harvest, and the health of everything you love. *The link between moral choices and material outcomes is made continually, and it is received and studied toward normative action. The texts suggest the interruption of desire, of consumption, and of acquisition. They link that interruption to the order of the natural world, of harvest*

² The AAR and its sister organization, the SBL, both originated from confessional bodies aimed at promoting Christian faith in the context of the educational system in the USA, cf. Smith (2000), pp. 87–93.

³ Zoloth (2016), pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv093>.

*time and planting. Our scholarly behavior is a part of this, for unless we see the world of the charcoal burner, our work will be lacking. [my emphasis] ... We must be interrupted; we must stop. To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are making, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work—even our good work—to attend to the urgency of this question.*⁴

As scholars who read the texts that show how a human life might be lived in view of God, we are used to disbelief and used to the idea that religion is trivial or naïve, or simply unrealistic. All we have is words—we have no armies, only students and colleagues. *All we can do is teach—to act as moral agents, to live out our work.* We make a living by struggling to understand the truth of the world, speaking parrhesia. And here it is important to note that we like hard inquiry, and we believe in skepticism—but we do not believe in ignorance and we do not support the denial of data. We are teachers. We live in a time, we teach at a time, when religions are in center stage of history, have marched into the center stage and, in the center of the stage, enact and speak.... We must stop, and we must start—to support the peacemakers and the climate protectors, the life sustainers. ... I wanted to be a president who took seriously the prophetic duty of my field, bioethics, to warn, to speak of the possibility of our power and our responsibility, and who interrupted you and told you to let the call of the stranger stop you in your tracks and the brokenness of the earth call you to action.⁵

In a follow-up response to this presidential address on the online AAR newsletter, Mary L. Keller not only supported the call for moral commitment from the past president of the AAR, but also added a more urgent tone to the deliberation in her call for an eco-currency as a measure of human consumption of natural resources.⁶ The main point that I wish to highlight is the fact that she self-identifies as an “applied historian of religion”—a term which, in the context of the article—must be taken to mean something akin to Gramsci’s “organic intellectual”, i.e., a scholar-activist who identifies with the moral call of climate activism, that is, who sees a direct advocacy role for the scholar:

How can research communities respond so slowly to the catastrophe at hand? How can we either maintain our ignorance or pretend that the theology of interruption described by Zoloth is simply not on? ... the adults

⁴ Zoloth (2016), p. 13.

⁵ Zoloth (2016), pp. 20–24.

⁶ Keller (2016), <http://rsn.aarweb.org/articles/laurie-zolothwas-right-ask-aar-sabbatical-its-too-little-too-late>.

are abdicating their moral responsibility and leaving the mortal fight to their children.

The post on the RSN page was reposted on Facebook by Russell McCutcheon, which ensued in a chain of posts as to what an “applied historian of religion” can be. Our conclusion amounted to that it signifies an engaged, committed, but essentially a theological scholarship in the guise of religious studies. In fact, when one follows up the biography of Laurie Zoloth, it is quite clear this is the case. Zoloth was Director of the Program in Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University, before moving to the chairs of Religious Studies, Bioethics and Medical Humanities at Northwestern University. In this context, it is noteworthy that she is a member of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, which shows in her presidential address. Drawing on Hebrew scriptures and rabbinic sources, she advocates a position that constructs scholarship as an extension of the scriptural vision encoded in the corpus of religious literature.

Imagining Scholarship on Religion: Contests on “Phenomenology”

In two recent issues of the flagship journal of the American Academy of Religion, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, the issue of the normativity of scriptural reasoning was addressed with specific reference to recent issues regarding Hindu and Islamic traditions. The *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 1 (2016) included a “Roundtable on Normativity in Islamic Studies” which addressed issues relating to the role of the Qur’an in Islamic identity formation in contexts of modernity vs. tradition, while *JAAR* 84, no. 2 (2016) included a “Roundtable in Outrage, Scholarship, and the Law in India” which addressed the now famous depublishing in India by Oxford University Press of Wendy Doniger’s book *The Hindus* on grounds that it misrepresents Hindu religious traditions and constituted an example of Western colonial devaluation of indigenous traditions, an orientalist miscasting of the Other out of disdain for the dignity of the indigenous tradents.

The issues at stake in especially *JAAR* 84, no. 2, on Hinduism, are neatly summed up by Paul Courtright who, participating in a debate on scholarly agency in *JAAR*, responds to Russell McCutcheon’s rejoinder (and here following the trend set by the *éminence grise* of religious studies, Jonathan Z. Smith) that in choosing to narrate certain data and perspectives, thus emphasizing this or that particular perspective to the exclusion of others, is essentially constructing (this or that) religion—hence the famous statement of Smith that “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study”—that the scholarly representation of a religious Other is essentially *a kind of writing of fiction*.⁷ As Courtright puts it:

⁷ Courtright (2006), pp. 751–54. The citation of Jonathan Z. Smith is from the “Introduction”, Smith (1982), p. xi.

how do we do our work when some of the Others say, “you got it right, that’s what I mean,” or, “I hadn’t thought of it that way before, but, yes, that makes sense,” whereas other Others say, “your interpretation is offensive to me, and to all Hindus. Your book should be banned”? The argument goes to the question of agency: the agencies of the others, and our own agency as scholars. It is easier, perhaps, when the context is face-to-face: just us sitting around the kitchen table. The other speaks, another Other tells it differently, the scholar transmits all this to her reader. But, even here, as McCutcheon rightly notes, some interpretation is inevitable. The scholar is doing the writing, and even with a direct quote of the other, there is still the matter of context, description, framing—choices.

What Courtright enunciates is a typical problem of that approach to the study of religion called phenomenology. Basically, and this is a gross simplification of a much larger academic conversation, a phenomenological approach implies a sympathetic (perhaps even empathetic) representation of a religious tradition in all its facets, a suspension of suspicion such that what is represented as the insider viewpoint is taken to be the real essence of the religious tradition or practice—the scholar-observer becomes in this view a participant-observer-caretaker. And thus, by extension, it also implied the wider question of who is allowed to speak on and on behalf of religious traditions. The set of conceptual and scholarly problems that come to the fore in these debates hinges on the stances taken to the insider–outsider debate in the definition and representations of religion/religious traditions.

These debates have been lively and at times acrimonious, and while very densely documented over a long period, just in the last few years the debate has been shaped primarily by an exchange between Russell T. McCutcheon and Robert Orsi, as well as other conversation partners chipping in.⁸

The critical stance to religion, religious traditions, the practitioners and their insider viewpoints espoused by someone like Russell McCutcheon can be traced back to, or be said to be inspired by, Jonathan Z. Smith’s conception of theorizing religion as a metaphoric process whereby creative juxtapositions give rise to new ways of conceiving of religious phenomena. This is a procedure most classically spelled out in his short essay, “Bible and Religion”.⁹ In this view theorizing religion proceeds in a fourfold procedure, namely description (as thick a description as possible); comparison (as widely as possible); redescription (in terms of

⁸ McCutcheon: McCutcheon (1998), pp. 51–72; McCutcheon (2006), pp. 720–50; Martin (2000), pp. 95–97; McCutcheon (2001, 2003a, b, 2014a, b); Arnal and McCutcheon (2012). Issues in the debate from this perspective are now conveniently summarized in the Festschrift for Don Wiebe, who pursued a career in arguing for the difference between the study of religion and theology—and for keeping these apart: Arnal et al. (2014).

Robert Orsi and some voices responding to McCutcheon from an Orsian perspective: Orsi (2006); Orsi (2016); Orsi (2012); Griffiths (1998), pp. 893–896; Roberts (2006), pp. 697–719; Omer (2011), pp. 459–96; Blum (2012), pp. 1025–1048; Dunn (2016), pp. 881–902; Lybarger (2016), pp. 127–156.

⁹ Smith (2000).

conceptual frames alien to the initial approach to the phenomenon theorized); and rectification of categories (translation of the phenomenon analyzed and explained into a container set of categories, the classificatory operation of which causes the phenomenon to be named and identified differently according to the explanatory purposes of the scholar). An approach like this does not necessitate that insiders to a religious tradition recognize themselves in your analysis and interpretation/explanation, and furthermore, there is no conjunction that only insiders may speak to and on behalf of the religious tradition concerned. The kind of theorizing intended in this procedure is one that is conceptually best at home in the humanities, and in which religion is analysed, explained and theorized as a human phenomenon by means of theories derived from a wide array of the human and social sciences. Hence the propensity in project groups like Culture on the Edge to explain insider concepts like faith, or belief, as of religion in its various operations, as strategies of identity-making, of authority construction, of social formation, of invention of tradition, and so on. The clarion call that rises above all this is the classic formulation of Fredric Jameson, namely to “Always historicize!”¹⁰ (I will shortly draw some conclusions regarding the conceptual operation of historicizing.)

Over against his strong insistence on historicizing religion, and its manifestation as tradition,¹¹ one finds the broad stream of phenomenology of religion in its various scholarly manifestations. The academic study of religion as a science had its beginnings in the second half of the nineteenth century exactly as phenomenology of religion, the origins of which subsisted in broader cultural-critical and countercultural shifts in European and North American societies—the development of phenomenology of religion was implicated in the late Victorian development of a universalist outlook on the world.¹² More broadly, and this is conceded by Robert Orsi, the long development of the concept of religion as something in itself, as a *sui generis* phenomenon, was the result of European colonial expansion and projection of European hegemony over the world.¹³ This construction of religion as a category of social definition is, of course, picked up and highlighted by the scholars in the Smith/McCutcheon ambit, but this aspect of the study of religion is not my focus here. This long history notwithstanding, phenomenology of religion is mostly seen in the light of Orsi’s characterization of the study of religion:

¹⁰ Jameson (1981).

¹¹ On historicizing religious traditions, see Engler and Grieve (2005); Grieve and Weiss (2005), pp. 1–15; Lewis and Hammer (2007).

¹² Masuzawa (2005).

¹³ Smith (1998), pp. 269–84. For a more extended exposition of the imperial nature of the definition of religion, see Horsley (2003). Horsley’s *Religion and Empire* was the result of a roundtable panel presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the papers of which were subsequently published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. See also the now blooming industry of studies exploring the making of religions in the course of the colonial project, Pennington (2005); Gottschalk (2012). For the South African context, see the work of David Chidester on how the British colonial government of the Cape of Good Hope classified the “religion” of the indigenous peoples encountered in the Border area of the colony for the purposes of governmentality: Chidester (1996); Chidester (2014).

Rather, it is to emphasize that religious theorizing at its best tracks back and forth from lived contexts in the present and the past to the issues and questions of contemporary moment in the academic study of religion, and then back again, allowing each—the empirical and the theoretical—to inform, question, and illuminate the other. The insistence on this intellectual and existential movement between practice and theory permits the men and women we study to contest and resist what we scholars of religion make of them in theory. This is both an epistemological assumption and an ethical position. Religious theorizing is not done *upon* men and women, as if they were specimens in the natural sciences, but in relationship to them. It is done alongside them too, as they struggle to understand themselves and their worlds in the available light of their times. This is one reason that the insider/outsider question—whether a religious world is best (or only) understood by a practitioner of it or by a scholar with no affiliation to it—is so beside the point. All humans are always insiders and outsiders to their worlds, which is what makes research in the humanities and social sciences possible. Another objective of the volume is to resist the utter unraveling or rejection of key concepts in the study of religion. The point is taken that religion and religions are always to be understood in their local and particular coordinates.¹⁴

Later Orsi goes on to say, “Religious theorizing is not done upon men and women, as if they were specimens in the natural sciences, but in relationship to them. It is done alongside them too, as they struggle to understand themselves and their worlds in the available light of their times.” In this he takes up an earlier statement, namely that it is incumbent on scholars of religion to take seriously the real-world concerns and investments of religious people and, through scholarship, assist in these life struggles.¹⁵

Therefore, here is the big question: how does one represent the insider concerns and perspectives sympathetically/empathetically, if this is what is called for, namely to stand in solidarity with the concerns and life struggles of the people we study? In other words, how close should we stand to our data, in which positional relationship? In recent rethinking of what is involved, or at stake, in the study of religion it has been maintained—especially in the circles where critical theory of religion is promoted—that what is required as a normal procedure of theorizing religion is the mapping of theory on to data. This procedure was eloquently formulated by Jonathan Z. Smith by means of two parables from the oeuvre of Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science” and “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”. The first is an allegory about a map without distortion, a “map with absolute congruency to its subject

¹⁴ Orsi (2012), p. 11.

¹⁵ Orsi (2012), p. 9.

matter, and, hence, a map that is both absolutely useless to second-order intellection, as well as for finding one's way around".¹⁶

Two Parables: Maps, Territories, and Rewritten Texts

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, these Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographer's Guild struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point by point with it. The following generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography, as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all of the Land there is no other Relic of the Discipline of Geography.¹⁷

The second parable or allegory also derives from a short story of Jorge Luis Borges. It is the story of "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote".¹⁸

¹⁶ Smith (2000), p. 90. The dual play on first-order and second-order intellection, or, as it is phrased in the context of this discussion: the interplay between "map" and "territory", is foundational to the argument pursued here. On the one hand, the scholar of religion is engaged in a second-order reflection on religious phenomena of various types. The scholar is reconfiguring, redescribing, comparing and rectifying categories, often in terms and categories with which the "insider" to that religious tradition would not necessarily agree. It is true that the scholar of religion represents the concepts, beliefs and judgements that together inform and make up the subject's identification of his or her experience, but "at the level of explanation, in my sort or language at the level of redescription, the scholar offers 'an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and might not meet with his approval. This is perfectly justifiable and is, in fact, normal procedure'", Proudfoot (1985) as cited by Smith 2000, p. 90. The scholarly procedure of mapping data in accordance with theory, what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the "comparative enterprise", that is the fourfold procedure of description, classification, comparison and explanation (Smith (2000), p. 87) or "the four moments in the comparative enterprise" — description, comparison, redescription and rectification of categories (Smith (2000), p. 87; Mack (1996), pp. 256–259, a discussion of Smith's theoretical position), denies the possibility of the student of religious phenomena merely repeating or paraphrasing the subjects under scrutiny. Much of religious scholarship is characterized by an unwillingness to seriously engage in considerations of theory of religion. At most, theory and its necessary entailments are reduced to method, a procedure of reading texts that avoids any effort at redescription. In most cases exegesis amounts to nothing more than paraphrasing (this is still the case, for example in the classic exegetical genre, the biblical commentary). In consequence, theories of literature as well as social theories have been adapted and pressed into service of exegesis, but these only serve to "escape the 'cost' of those theoretical positions", Smith (2000), p. 90.

¹⁷ Smith (2000), p. 91, a quotation in its entirety of Borges's (1999), p. 325.

¹⁸ Smith refers to this story in the context of his discussion of George Foot Moore's discussion of borrowings in Jewish religion, according to which the Jews borrowed concepts from other traditions, borrowings that were possible because ultimately these concepts were deeply rooted in Judaism itself. Therefore these were not "real" borrowings. In this context Smith refers to Borges's tale of Pierre

The story recounts the literary achievements of the fictional Pierre Menard, who in 1934 set out to write, not a copy of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, but *the Don Quixote*. "His aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes."¹⁹ Menard's *Don Quixote* was, however, not quite the same as Cervantes's. The differences between the two works were extremely subtle, for the latter differed from the first not in literal form, but in implications. For example, since 300 years have passed between the writing of the first and the second *Don Quixote*, in which *Don Quixote* itself became part of the complex history of the internecine years, the naturalness surrounding the writing and character of the first is lost in the second.²⁰ Menard does not attempt to be Cervantes, he tries to be Cervantes as Menard, a task, however skillfully accomplished (that is, with regard to achieving accurate and faultless seventeenth century Spanish grammar and style), executed not without a certain measure of affectation. The vividness of the bristling life of the world of the first novel is missing from the second, and the repetition of a seventeenth century soldier's discourse against letters in favour of arms (and that now from a contemporary of Bertrand Russell) strikes the reader as artificial ("reapse into these nebulous sophistries!").²¹ According to the narrator, the texts of Cervantes and Menard are verbally identical, but the *Don Quixote* of Menard is "almost infinitely richer"²² because of the irony involved. Repeating an anterior work in a later context is to be complicit in meanings you might not agree with, but also to make the text say something it did not say and mean the first time around.²³

Menard as an example of reproducing what was already there; see his "In Comparison a Magic Dwells", Smith (1982), pp. 30–31. The tale of Borges is taken from Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", (1999), pp. 45–55. I will make somewhat different use of the allegory. Borges's tale is a curious mixture of verisimilitude and the absurd, of fantasy and the seemingly historical. However, it can be profitably mined for its implications for the type of argument followed here in the context of an exposition of a theory of religion.

¹⁹ Borges, "Pierre Menard", p. 49.

²⁰ "To compose *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of the twentieth century it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have passed, charged with the most complex happenings—among them, to mention only one, the same *Don Quixote*", Borges, "Pierre Menard", p. 51.

²¹ Borges, "Pierre Menard".

²² Borges, "Pierre Menard".

²³ With regard to the former: "...his resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred", Borges, "Pierre Menard", and with regard to the latter aspect, see the comparison between the two texts: "The latter [Cervantes], for instance, wrote (*Don Quixote*, Part One, Chapter Nine): [... truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds,

The Pierre Menard parable of Borges raises a number of considerations pertinent to a discussion of the relationship between scholarly reflection and religious experience and phenomena, that is, between the scholar of religion and his or her subject of study.²⁴ The first issue that attention is drawn to is the impossibility of repeating an anterior work. As the literary work becomes part of its own effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) meanings, significances, functions and uses are accrued to it which makes the later duplicate a stranger to the original. The meaning determining context of the duplicate creates a different set of meanings. When duplication or rewriting is nevertheless attempted, it has the character of affectation and artificiality. In the context of a discussion of the study of religion, it implies that the scholar of religion cannot simply repeat or reflect the religious (or insider) viewpoints of the religious texts and phenomena studied. However sympathetically the data is represented and interpreted, description and interpretation cannot entail the reproduction of the tradition, religion, myths, rituals, and so on. It cannot privilege the self-representation of the subjects studied. That would be to simply recreate the data, in the image of our parable: it would be to write an identical text to the first. Scholarly description and interpretation always has the character of translation in the sense of *traduction*.²⁵ The “text” of description, interpretation and explanation is a translation²⁶ of the data into the matrices and categories of

witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.] Written in the seventeenth century, written by the “ingenious layman” Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes: [... truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.] History, mother of truth; the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place. The final clauses—example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future—are shamelessly pragmatic”, Borges, “Pierre Menard”.

²⁴ I am leaving aside questions of a literary nature, such as the absurd, bizarre and fantastical in Borges’s oeuvre. I will focus here only on what it can be made to say for the scholarly reflection on the study of religion.

²⁵ From traduce, to misrepresent. Theorizing, that is, the mapping of theory on to data, always implies a metaphorical process or the act of translation, if you wish. It is the proposal that the second-order language appropriate to one domain (the familiar/the known) may translate the second-order language appropriate to another domain (the unfamiliar/the unknown), or in the Durkheimian sense as followed here in this study, the proposal that the second-order language appropriate to society (in this case the known) may translate the second-order language appropriate to that of religion (in this case the unknown). It behoves us to keep in mind that “translation is never fully adequate. There is always discrepancy. (To repeat the old tag: ‘To translate is to traduce.’)”, Smith (2000), p. 91.

²⁶ Again, in the sense of changing of condition of existence, or transformation.

theory.²⁷ Theory, therefore, in a very real sense creates the resulting scholarly construction of the subject.²⁸

Beyond Phenomenology: Towards a Discourse Approach

In his book *Beyond Phenomenology. Rethinking the Study of Religion*, Gavin Flood makes the operation of signification central to his reimagining of the study of religion. In what is arguably the core conceptual and methodological chapter in the book, he poses narrative theory (and one can add here, text communication theory) as the core conceptual issue in rethinking how to do the study of religion, for representing religious data and mapping theory on to data is an act or operation of signification.²⁹ It is to define a signified to a signifier. Science is, after all, a metaphorical process of signification, of saying “this” (the explanandum—what is taken to be strange) is “that” (the explanans—the known). For this reason, one can maintain that scholarship is a kind of exegetical operation, of reading data (primary and secondary), and explaining their significance.

Not Mapping Theory: Phenomenology of Religion

The relationship between theory and data poses, for the study of religion, in light of the history of the discipline, an especially problematic and thorny issue. The “founding” of the study of religion as “science of religion” by F. Max Müller in the late nineteenth century and the identification of science of religion with phenomenology of religion as the objective study of religion through ethnography and history (the term “phenomenology of religion” was coined by Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887) went hand in hand with the aspiration to scientific

²⁷ The representation of data in scholarly theorizing and thinking demands more than a mere paraphrasing of the subject material. For the scholarly and theoretical purposes of comparison weak translation will be insufficient for purposes of thought. As Smith put it: “To summarize: a theory, a model, a conceptual category, cannot be simply the data writ large”, Smith (2000), p. 91 (emphasis in original).

²⁸ In this regard I want to draw attention to the distinction made by Norwood Hanson between “sense-datum” words or “data-words” and “theory-loaded” words; see Braun (2000), p. 9; Braun and McCutcheon (2000). Although the context in which Braun refers to Hanson deals with concept formation in religious studies scholarship, the issue is relevant here as well. Hanson illustrates the difference between “sense-datum” words or “data-words” and “theory-loaded” words with the following illuminating example. Consider the two words “hole” and “crater”. In Hanson’s example “hole” (as “spatial concavity”) is a data-word, that is, its minimal lexical meaning can be ascertained by observation, and let us assume for the moment that something like objective observation is possible. In contrast to this, to label a certain spatial concavity a “crater” already expresses an interpretation as to its origin, namely that its creation was quick, violent and explosive. But note, the formation of the “hole” is not a given, only the absence of matter in the concavity. How this effect was produced and how we should name the phenomenon is the result of assumptions and interpretations. The “crater” is therefore produced by our assumptions and interpretations. In general, concepts “are products of scholars’ cognitive operations to be put to work in the service of scholars’ theoretical interest in the objects of their research. Concepts are not given off by the objects or our interests”, Braun (2000), p. 9; Braun and McCutcheon (2000).

²⁹ Flood (1999).

objectivity, which in the field of the study of religion translated into causal explanations of religion, yet through non-reductionist descriptions and interpretations.³⁰ The massive presence of phenomenologists of religion in the history of the discipline, from Max Müller and de la Saussaye to Eliade, had as a result that phenomenology of religion became the dominant paradigm in the academic study of religions.³¹

Religious studies within the framework of phenomenology of religion can be typified as a discourse with a method but without a theory (Gavin Flood characterizes this approach as “antitheoretical”), because of the reluctance to impose theory on data, and the wish to allow religious phenomena to reveal themselves.³² In phenomenology what is important are the data and their illumination, by whatever method. What is needed is “fellow feeling” or empathy. The assumption is, of course, that the religious data are transparent as “religious”.³³ However, the “timelessness” which in this way comes to pervade phenomenological studies of religion causes it to be blind to the historical situatedness of the scholarly study of religion. The ideological foundations and presuppositions built into scholarly research, according to which data are selected, sifted, organized and created, call for reflexive thinking and research.³⁴ However, what is most important in the context of this study is to understand the effect of the hidden assumptions of phenomenology of religion on the description of religion and on the history and character of the discipline of history of religion as a whole. It has been pointed out that a theological and ahistorical perspective governs the phenomenological understanding of religion in, for example, Mircea Eliade’s work. A major problem with this approach is that it sees religion as transcending history and, therefore, as a *sui generis* phenomenon, outside of history and socio-political structures.³⁵ Two examples will serve to illustrate this point. The first is taken from Eliade’s *The Myth of the Eternal Return*:

³⁰ This particular confluence of discursive streams was formed by Husserlian phenomenology and Hegelian philosophy; see Flood (1999), p. 31. As such Husserlian phenomenology was an outgrowth of German philosophy of the subject (Subjektsphilosophie) of German idealism of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism. The Husserlian transcendental “I” as the absolute ground for certainty resulted, in the shape of the eidetic reduction and epoché, in a search for timeless essences, (1999), pp. 9–10. It is from phenomenology in general, and Husserl in particular, that phenomenology of religion derived some of its central concepts, namely “bracketing” (epoché), truth statement, the intuition of essences, and empathy, (1999), p. 16.

³¹ Flood (1999), p. 8.

³² Flood (1999), p. 16.

³³ Flood (1999), p. 4.

³⁴ As Flood put it so beautifully: “Mocassin walking or empathy does not provide a sufficiently rigorous theoretical basis on which to build an academic discipline”, Flood (1999), p. 4. “Mocassin walking” refers to the Indian adage “never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins”.

³⁵ Flood (1999), p. 6. For an overview of the field of conventional and canonical approaches to the study of religion, consult the following comprehensive collection of essays: Whaling (1995); see in this volume the essays by Whaling, “Introduction”, p.1–40, King, “Historical and Phenomenological Approaches”, pp. 41–176; Ninian Smart, “The Scientific Study of Religion in Its Plurality”, pp. 177–190; Whaling (1995), pp. 191–252; David Wulff, “Psychological Approaches”, pp. 253–320; Günter Kehrner and Bert Hardin, “Sociological Approaches”, pp. 321–50; Jarich Oosten, “Cultural Anthropological Approaches”, pp. 351–84, and Wouter E. A. van Beek, “Cultural Anthropology and

Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype; this fact is well enough known for us to confine ourselves to recalling a few examples. "We must do what the gods did in the beginning" (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, VII, 2, 1, 4). "This the gods did; thus men do" (Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa, I, 5, 9, 4). This Indian adage summarizes all the theory underlying rituals in all countries. We find the theory among so-called primitive peoples no less than we do in developed cultures.³⁶

This passage illustrates Eliade's theory of hierophany or the manifestation of the "sacred" in religious forms, especially in ritual which according to this theory, recapitulates myths of origins. In fact, in this view, the origins of rituals are in myth. Not only has the theory of hierophanies become suspect in cultural materialist perspectives,³⁷ but it is also clear (now with the benefit of distance and hindsight) that these theories of myth and ritual harbour implicit theological assumptions as well as ahistorical understandings of religion. In this view, religion transcends history.

The second example of what a phenomenological description would be like comes from Gavin Flood³⁸:

For example, a phenomenological account of a Hindu ritual offering 108 pots of sanctified water to Ganeśa, will simply describe the pots and the actions of the participants in a way that assumes a detached objectivism. A dialogical account will assume the presence of the researcher, will be explicit about the research questions brought to bear upon the situation, and will focus on the analysis of language-as-performance in relation to action within a historically circumscribed horizon. Similarly, a dialogical reading of the New Testament might focus on the text as a literary document and upon the differing historical contingencies that produced both it and its reader.

the Many Functions of Religion", pp. 385–98. We are concerned here with a specific theory of religion, as social construction, social formation and mythmaking. The point on phenomenology of religion is only raised here to illustrate the background against which Jonathan Z. Smith developed his practice of historico-comparative studies of religion. Many essays of his take issue, for example, with Eliade's work and present rereadings of his work.

³⁶ Flood (1999), p. 25.

³⁷ See the critique of this type of explanation of myth and ritual in the essays of Jonathan Z. Smith, where he clearly overturns this view by showing how myths and rituals are to be understood as social performances grounded in, and elicited by, specific social circumstances. Exceedingly well-written discussions of myth and ritual, the emergence of the Myth and Ritual school of (mainly) Cambridge, and the polyparadigmatic function of myth, ritual and religion are to be found in Versnel (1984), pp. 194–246; Versnel (1993). In the main he shows how myths and rituals are strategies for dealing with ambiguous situations, hence the remainders of inconsistencies and ambiguities not smoothed over in myths and rituals.

³⁸ Flood (1999), pp. 7–8.

The contrast in this example between what Flood calls a phenomenological approach and a dialogical approach³⁹ neatly illustrates the “antitheoretical” stance of phenomenological studies and its feigned objectivity. Moreover, it is under the guise of “detached objectivism” that it becomes possible to reproduce, in the terms and with the conceptualization suggested by the research subject(s), the religious expressions and their meanings, of the native or insider viewpoint. If gods are named as agents in the insider version of their “binding narratives” or myths, does it follow that the researcher should conclude from that that myths are narratives about the primordial activities of the gods, and that religion is the reverence paid to superhuman beings? If religion is a way of speaking about cultural and human *arts de faire*, and if, as it is our purpose here, the “life” of religion is to be located in the “complex fabric of active interests of people in the real world”,⁴⁰ then we should also understand that the transcendent, superhuman beings of myth and religious discourse⁴¹ only exist as discursive entities. As Braun puts it:

... insofar as the gods or ancestors “live,” it is contemporary people who give them life by talking about, to and with them. This, in turn, suggests that the object of the scholar’s study is not the gods but the complex social operations by which, and the conditions which, people discursively bring the gods to life. This orientation opens new lines of inquiry: what human interests are served in keeping the gods alive? What are the variety ramifications for self, society and culture in the cultivation and preservation of the gods?⁴²

Following this line of reasoning phenomenology of religion as theoretical approach is seen as inadequately distanced from the subject matter to enable and facilitate the scholarly comparative and explanatory enterprise of description, comparison, redescription and rectification of categories.

Meanwhile, Back at the Map

The map parable of Borges extends the application of the Pierre Menard parable even further in the direction of the relationship between theory and religion. The parable points to the fact that a map that is completely co-extensive with the territory it describes is useless. Such a map is not a map at all. It is nothing but a copy of the country the cartographers had set out to map. As a map it was useless, since in terms of the parable, to “read” the map was never to have left the landscape at all. The map could not explain the country it was supposed to map, and no

³⁹ Flood’s term “dialogical approach” includes all the elements of the theory of religion espoused here, namely self-reflexivity, narrative (and narrative theory), history (and historical contingency), culture, signs, socio-political domains or contexts of meaning-creation as well as social and cultural theory. Flood clothes this contrast also in other terms, namely the contrast between a “philosophy of consciousness” (that is, phenomenology) and a “philosophy of the sign” (dialogical approach).

⁴⁰ Braun (2000), p. 11.

⁴¹ However, one wants to name them: gods, spirits, ancestors, and so on.

⁴² Braun (2000), p. 11.

reader would be able find directions through the landscape of the countryside. The implications for the study of religious phenomena and the conceptualization of religion are clear.

A map represents an interpretation and explanation of the territory concerned. It does so by arbitrarily juxtaposing categories, points of reference and symbolic codes on to a severely foreshortened graphic representation of the territory or landscape. All this is done according to specific perspectives, necessitated by, or called for according to the purposes the map should serve. That explains the existence of a variety of maps: political, ecological, historical, economic and agricultural, as well as geographical maps. It is in this sense that theories function like conceptual maps, by selecting from the vast amount of raw data exactly and only that which will be represented in symbolic codes within the coordinates, categories and frames of theory with a view to description, comparison and explanation. Selecting, collecting and ordering according to a defined taxonomy, that is the task of the historian or scholar of religion.⁴³

It should soon enough become clear, in the course of this exposition on religion, history and the history of religion, why I started with a parable about a constructed map. The twofold metaphor of “map” and “territory” characterizes much of the theoretical thinking of Jonathan Z. Smith on religion and the study of religion (the “social constructivist theory of religion”), and in order to properly conceptualize “religion” and the study of religion, as it becomes relevant in this argument towards a discourse approach to religio-historical study, I needed to tease out from these metaphors their implications for a study of religion.⁴⁴

The Study of Religion as Discourse Analysis

While I have already intimated that the study of religion is a kind of exegesis I want to push the conventional phenomenologically oriented study of religion beyond the conventions of both phenomenology and its critical opposite. Following on from Gavin Flood’s critique of

⁴³ We would do well to remind ourselves of the formulations of Jonathan Z. Smith and Willi Braun, already noted earlier: “There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy”, Smith (1982), p. xi. Or as Willi Braun puts it: “We must regard religion as a concept, in the technical sense, and not as a substance that floats ‘out there’ ... Concepts are ideas used to allocate the stuff of the real world into a class of objects so as to position these objects for thought that is aimed toward explanation of their causes, functions, attractiveness to individuals and societies, relationships to other concepts”, in Braun (2000), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁴ Especially important here, in connection with the map–territory metaphor, is the collection of essays of Smith (1978), notably the essays “Map is not Territory” (pp. 289–309), “The Wobbling Pivot” (pp. 88–103), “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand” (pp. 129–146), “Wisdom and Apocalyptic” (pp. 67–78), “Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?” (pp. 147–171), “The Temple and the Magician” (pp. 172–189), and “Good News is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel” (pp. 190–207); also Smith (1982) and Smith (1987). A very good overview of Smith’s theory of religion and his approach to the study of religion is found in Gill (2000), pp. 451–462, Gill (1998a), pp. 298–313 but especially Gill (1998b), pp. 283–312.

phenomenology, I nevertheless want to start with teasing out some critical pointers exactly from phenomenology as a method for my proposal of a discourse analysis approach. In James V. Spickard's essay "Phenomenology" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, he highlights the problem already suggested above (the context, I might add as a reminder, is one of the methods of how to do phenomenological research in religion):

Instead, it allows one to enter into an aspect of the informants' religious world as it presents itself to their consciousness. From this, one may draw conclusions about their religion as it is actually lived—what some scholars are calling "lived religion" (333) ... Contemporary empirical phenomenology seeks to do something quite different. It seeks to grasp the world as people experience it, shorn of their interpretations of those experiences. Those who follow Husserl emphasize the dynamic of consciousness and consciousness-of. Heidegger's followers emphasize the simultaneous experience of object and context. Merleau-Ponty's emphasize the embodied nature of all experiencing. All, however, seek to capture subjective consciousness. This is the Object toward which the phenomenological method is directed (336) ... As David Yamane (2000) noted in a trenchant critique of my work on Navajo rituals, *researchers do not have unmediated access to other people's experiences. What they have—what any interview study has—is a set of narratives about experience. That is, phenomenological researchers get their data by interviewing informants about what has happened to them. In response, they get stories. People say "this happened, then this happened, it took such-and-such shape, etc." This is not direct experience; it is narrative. We know that people are highly susceptible to narratives, often retrospectively retelling their experiences according to culturally valued scripts of one kind or another. David Bromley (1998) and Sarah Pike (2009), among others, have noted how Americans often construct "captivity narratives" to explain supposedly normal people's participation in so-called "cults", shootings, etc. How do we know that our informants are not reconstructing the experiences about which they tell us in their phenomenological interviews? [my emphases]*⁴⁵

In relating the problematic of "reading data" in this manner in what is meant to imply a sympathetic analysis and theorizing of religious phenomena and expressions, Spickard flags the problem of signification anew. The action and the broader process of signification need to be understood in quite a material sense. Religion and religious meaning (however one wishes to understand these) do not float in a dematerialized and decontextualized manner in thin air. They are not "just there". As I stated in a different context:

⁴⁵ Spickard (2013), p. 342; Stausberg and Engler (2013).

No religion or cult is simply “there”, rather religions and cults are, by contrast, performatives: they are the products of specific human actors performing, negotiating, creating categories and signifiers under the influence of socio-cultural forces through time and within specific geographies and material realities, using culturally commonplace ways to establish cult groups and cult practices, to construct complex cultural discourses, to interweave multi-vocal myth and practice from a huge manifold of Greco-Roman cultural repertoires, and to organize new complex social formations and creating new habitus. New religions or cults, or new versions of already established (imported) cults “happened” as human agents in concrete circumstances performed concrete actions to found such cult groups and invented traditions to serve identity-making purposes. Religions did not spread or migrate, people did, who brought with them their religious practices, beliefs, and paraphernalia. Religion, then, does not exist in general but as concrete cult instantiations, organized by their members as a form of social life, shaped and bounded by concrete enscripturations of household codes and identity charters.⁴⁶

Religion, therefore, is the collective noun for the aggregate results or products of a wide array of operations of signification. These operations of significations each subsists in a material medium that we can study as speech acts. Thus, what is true of the multileveled, composite nature of speech acts is equally true of every operation of signification making up religion. These are:

- Locution—the literal content of the speech act or signification.
- Illocution—what is not said or represented, but without which the act of signification will not be complete or intelligible (often the context of the representation that speaks along with the literal contents).
- Perlocution—the purpose of the presentation or signification, the intended use to which it is put; there need not be any direct congruence between contents, context and intended use, since signifiers are often floating and derive meanings from varying contexts of use, hence the changing meanings of religious expressions through time and variable contexts of implementation.⁴⁷

Seeing it like this is to understand that religious language itself, as speech act, as social action, as rhetoric and as propaganda, is a mapping onto experiences of religious and cultural matrices, of social interests and ends, of world-creating strategies. In a sense, “primary” religious language is itself a second-order reflection and intellection. Aside from the question whether it is possible at all to have unmatrixed experiences, that is pure experience before

⁴⁶ van den Heever (2014), <http://greco-romanreligion.blogspot.com/2014/12/redescribing-cult-formation-in-early.html>.

⁴⁷ A point recently made by Russell McCutcheon in a Culture on the Edge blog post, McCutcheon (2016), <http://edge.ua.edu/russell-mccutcheon/s-o-b/>.

interpretation (and I do not believe that to be possible), in view of the *examples offered here of historical instances of proposing religious viewpoints*, as rhetorical statements or proposals, one can say that religious language is also second-order reflection—and here it is important to note that from now on what is said about religion and the study of religion equally holds for theology and the study of theology. It should be noted that the historian of religion only has access to texts, that is, experiences that have been organized, filtered, matrixed and mapped, shaped and presented to pursue a specific end. The rhetoric of the text and the religious expression itself, the world it creates *and proposes*, militates against seeing religious texts as simply expressive of inchoate experience. Religious texts, especially of the kind under consideration here, propose worlds and so attempt to *evoke or create experience* in accordance with the world view and ideology offered.

Strictly speaking, one should differentiate between three orders of language: first-order religious language, which is not accessible to the student of religious phenomena, being pre-reflective, unorganized and unlanguage “pre-experience experience” (this is purely conceptually for the sake of the argument; in reality the language and the conceptual matrix creates the religious experience); second-order language, which is what is found in religious practices and expressions, being *experience as it is conceptualized and presented or proposed*; and third-order language, which is the language of the scholar in the endeavour of comparison and redescription (*itself not without its ideological and rhetorical thrust*). Rethinking our dual metaphor of “map” and “territory” within this framework implies that we do not operate with a unidimensional metaphor. Rather, our “maps” and “territories” are three-dimensional or multidimensional. In essence this means that rhetoric is everything, and ubiquitous. Having been filtered through cultural matrices, terministic screens and rhetorical frames, all experience and reflection upon experience or theorizing of experience, that is, every map and territory, is the result of an act of cultural creativity. We *make* our world—at every conceivable level.

One direct implication of the complexity involved in reading (phenomenologically) religious data and expressions is the caveat of the possible divergence between the surface expression (the overt referent) and the intended (covert) referent in religious expression. This can be graphically explained in the following diagram (Fig. 1):

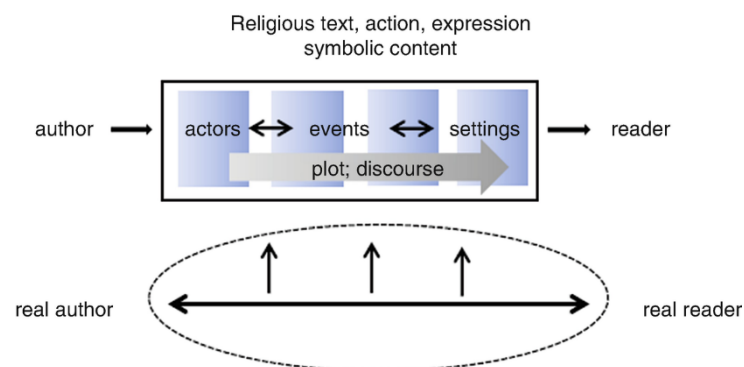


Fig. 1 The double referentiality of religious expressions

My argument here is simply this: it is concerned with *what happens outside of the text or religious expression* (or, to put it in conventional hermeneutical parlance: what happens in front of the text, around the text) albeit on the basis of what is inside the text—the literal content of the religious expression. My concern is with works of religious expression (texts, actions/rituals, symbolic production) as the artefactual remains of “religious” practices, and thus the recalibration of the study of religious practices to make visible, to conceptualize, and to theorize the social-rhetorical function of religious expressions as tools or artefacts of meaning-making, myth-making and world-making practices.⁴⁸ In other words, it is focused on religious expressions as embedded in social action, as *a kind of social action itself*, as a constituent of the event of social space-making in the construction of social positionalities. Thus, the position taken here deals with the double reference of religious artefacts: as religious texts and other expressions denote symbolic content (world-making on the level of the text), so the religious production itself has a rhetorical context, to which it refers either implicitly or explicitly through its coded rhetoric, and into which it functions and projects as a material instance of world-making itself.⁴⁹

If this is what it means to historicize religious expressions, our data for explanation and theorizing, then it is equally possible—and incumbent on the scholar of religion—as Tyler Roberts seems to suggest, to historicize the scholarly analysis of religious data as well.⁵⁰ This would mean that one reads every discourse as a discourse in the context and frame of another discourse.⁵¹ If one then also keeps in mind that discourses do not exist as mere ideations, but exist as materially transmitted artefacts, then one can also speak of the discourse of the study of religion as a “field of scholarly production” (in reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known sociological concept of a field).

Like the previous diagram, Fig. 2 here represents the interplay between the two levels of the materiality of religious discourse construction and the representational event of religious and scholarly mediation. On the level of the “field of religious production” a real interaction takes place between author and readership through the means of the religious expression which encodes in its complex of compositional techniques and structure references to and constructions of symbols as well as suggested or implied symbolic meanings of these and affective relations to these symbolic expressions. When this process of religious production is theorized, it enters into another relation, namely with the “field of scholarly production”. In the field of scholarly production there is also a real interaction between scholars and audience

⁴⁸ Spatializing practices here indicate the manner in which we relate through discourse to others and the world around us, that is, creating a positionality on the basis of which we construct identity, social formation, morals and world views.

⁴⁹ In this regard Bruce Lincoln’s by now famous essay on the method of religious studies has achieved paradigmatic importance: Lincoln (2005), pp. 8–10, now republished in Lincoln (2012), pp. 1–3. See also Lincoln, “How to Read a Religious Text”, in Lincoln (2012), pp. 5–15.

⁵⁰ Roberts (2006).

⁵¹ Murphy (2000), pp. 183–192.

(which may be the broader scholarly community or the public very broadly conceived),⁵² and again, this set of interactions that comprise the field of scholarly production stands in a kind of derivative or “parasitic” relation to the field of religious production—it feeds off the field of religious production, but then subsumes or absorbs the latter into a wider, broader, higher, more encompassing arena of cultural production that, as commentary, stands in a supplementary or even antithetical position to the field of religious production. Seen from this perspective, theorizing religious production is social, cultural and political work that is funded by the religious production that itself is social, cultural and political work in constructing social positionality, relations and world. In effect, looking at it like this is to conceive of cultural work (in its most broadly conceived) as discourse construction understood in its most encompassing sense. To put it again in other words, all levels of cultural production as “languages spoken in the context of other languages”, are aspects of the construction of a knowledge of how things are and how this knowing encodes social positionality and social interests.⁵³

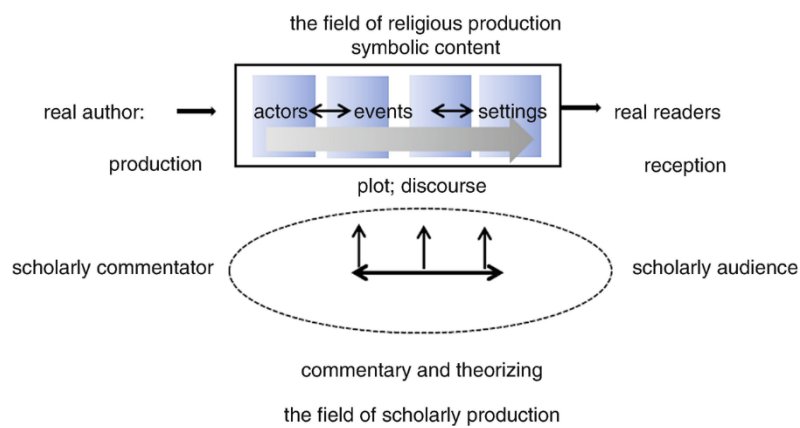


Fig. 2 The double referentiality of the field of scholarly production

Hovering over my presentation here is my definition of discourse: I propose a definition of discourse as an understanding of the *production of religious expressions and artefacts as well as the scholarship on such religious expressions as operations embedded in the field of discourse*, that is, products of and producers of sets of representations (which range from the spoken word, text, gestures, rituals, religious spaces, the rhythms of life as hidden persuasions), including the social locations that form the originary matrices for the particular inventions of these sets of representations; and the social interests encompassed/encapsulated in and giving rise to these sets of representations; the logic governing the interrelations between these factors or aspects; as well as the institutionalizations of such “domained” representations in canons of tradition,

⁵² Again, I use the term “real” in order to locate the interaction in the real world, but the interaction itself is, of course, shaped by imagined positionalities and self-representations which may stand in a broad and varied spectrum of relations to “real conditions”. But even here, “real conditions” are always to some (or greater) extent imagined: material conditions do not exist outside of the way in which they are conceived and represented.

⁵³ The phrase “languages spoken in the context of other languages” derives from the essay by Murphy (2000).

schools of thought, habitus as habituated action, social formations, cultural and socio-political-economic conventions, that is, as discursive formations.

I view the two “fields”, therefore, not as two discrete fields, but as one big interconnected immersed game of discourse production. The stance taken here in setting the two fields in relation to each other stems from the work of Jean-Louis Fabiani who, in his book on what a French philosopher is (here I deliberately substitute religious production for what he says about philosophy and philosophers), argues that the broad corpus of religious expressions and symbolic production as a subset of cultural production cannot be extracted from wider processes of signification as if it exists *sui generis*.⁵⁴ What Fabiani says of philosophy holds true for religious production as a scholarly industry, perhaps even more so: “It also includes material objects, spaces and social practices. It includes all types of reception, including the less orthodox.” Religious scholarly production is not the free-floating of disembodied ideas, but, as Fabiani suggests, the operational site—as well—of the socially and contextual determinant factors in the production of the discourse, hence the relocalization of this discourse production in this encompassing sense in sets of institutions (and here I freely expand on David Little’s exposition of Fabiani): the force of canons of themes, topics and methods; the publication industry with its own defined priorities; the marketing and publicizing industry; the academic industry of “graduate programs, journals, tenure processes, associations, prizes”; the production of second-order literature which is itself a production process of commodified intellectual labour.⁵⁵ Viewing it like this is to practice a kind of reflexive sociology of the combined fields of literary and scholarly production (to adapt a topic from Pierre Bourdieu). At this point, it should be clear that I am suggesting a kind of metatheory of scholarly production that situates itself beyond the phenomenology–critical theory divide.

Conclusion

The argument pursued here in this essay proceeds from the assumption that there is a structural parallel between religion—the practices, representations and expressions—conceived as discourse-making, and understanding the second- (or third-) order scholarship equally as discourse-making. Moreover, it is taken as given here that the two sets of discourses are not separate in kind, but stand in a continuum, that is, scholarly discourse is an extension of the primary discourse of religion.⁵⁶ And yet, this does not mean that scholarship is merely

⁵⁴ Fabiani (2010). I cite the translation from the text in Little (2010), <http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2010/10/french-philosophy.html>.

⁵⁵ I have recently made a similar point with regard to the study of hermeneutics as the philosophical analytics of the decoding of literary texts, van den Heever (2015), pp. 187–218: “Reading-reception is a process of interaction with physical objects that still bear the marks of the industry that produced them” (207).

⁵⁶ As I have intimated all along, I am deeply suspicious of a principled contrast between primary data and secondary order interpretation of the data. Such a contrast assumes that it is possible to have unmediated religious expressions and practices. Reality is the opposite: all religious practices and

an extension of religious practices and attitudes, neither is its function to affirm religious values. Rather, viewing both as species of discourse-making (in light of my definition of discourse), opens the possibility of radically historicizing both religion as primary discourse and the study of religion as secondary discourse. This is a way of conceiving the relationship between religion as primary discourse (the so-called insider perspective), and the scholarly study of religion as secondary discourse (the so-called outsider perspective), in a way that moves beyond the insider–outsider problem in the study of religion. As such, I am suggesting seeing the study of religion as a case of “in” in an “out manner”, and “out” in an “in manner”. The essay attempted an illustration of how one can view both primary religious data as well as scholarship on these as world-making operations, and thereby illustrates how one can understand religious theorizing also as a kind of politico-scholarly activism.

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