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The relationality of religion and science

Vollmer, Laura Jean

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Laura J. Vollmer
The Relationality of Religion and Science
Propositions

1. The lack of clarification regarding the meaning of key terms has become a central point of dispute in academia, resulting in a preoccupation with the questions of definitions, essentialism, explanation, and understanding. This lack of clarification can be amended by shifting our focus from the question of *what* the meaning of a term is to *how* a term means in a discourse-analytic framework.
2. ‘Relationality analysis’—making relations the primary object of analysis—shows this procedural ‘how’ by demonstrating that relational demarcation constructs the meaning of terms and structures changes that unfold in the historical evolution of the discourse, contributing a nuanced and refined method to the discourse-analytical framework.
3. This seems to present a paradox, as for a term to be individuated, it must be in a relationship. The paradox is resolved, however, by shifting our thinking away from relations *between* things to an understanding of relations as *the* thing—relations are basic and relata are derivative in the process of conceptualization.
4. Even if the primacy of relations is rejected at the theoretical level, it is methodologically important as a corrective to the essentialism that occurs even in the contextualization of terms in the thought that the core meaning of the terms will be conveyed in a specific context. As an alternative, terms are put in a relational matrix of meaning that is both more dynamic and structured than contextualism—dynamic because terms are treated as strictly ‘other-referential’ and the ‘other’ is limitless and structured because the meaning is *dependent on* the particular relation.
5. My examination of the historical discourse of the English language term ‘religion’ relative to the term ‘science’ shows that relational demarcation led to the attribution of definitions that were not pre-existing, i.e., relations structure discursive change. E.g., the first arguments for ‘religion’ and ‘science’ as oppositional concepts appear in the discourse alongside of the first instances of defining ‘religion’ in terms of ‘supernaturalism’ to the specific exclusion of ‘naturalism,’ the latter of which was associated with ‘science’ to the specific exclusion of ‘supernaturalism.’
6. Relationality analysis could also be applied to any other entangled concepts, showing how relations produce new views of the world, such as an examination of the term ‘secularism’ as a ‘religion-referential’ concept.
7. Relationality analysis is a valuable corrective in the history of religion-science constellations as it demonstrates that presumptions about relations are built into our definitions of the terms that are then used to argue for a relationship, creating a circular argument. E.g., the argument that the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘science’ are oppositional based on the supernaturalism-naturalism dichotomy is circular because the

supernaturalism/naturalism definitions are a product of framing 'religion' and 'science' as in opposition.

8. Relationality analysis is also socially important, as it clarifies the processes that lead to the particulars of meanings, including conflicting accounts, and thus accurately reflects the data in all its variety. Accounting for even mutually exclusive definitions of a single concept under a sole model means that particular relational constructs are not 'right' or 'wrong,' but rather religion-science relations or other relations that have led to societal conflict are equally (in)valid. This indeterminate veridicality is not an epistemological claim about our state of knowledge, but rather an ontological claim about the nature of concepts.
9. The above proposition points to the theoretical limitlessness of meaning, important for religious studies, academia at large, and beyond. Yet, there is a relational structure, providing parameters for analysis. E.g., 'religion' has been treated as (1) 'supernatural to the exclusion of natural' when contrasted with science and as (2) 'natural to the exclusion of supernatural' when framed as an object of scientific study. The meaning of 'religion' is so fluid as to encompass mutually exclusive definitions and, yet, the term 'religion' remains structured, namely by how the term is understood relative to the term 'science.'