



Editorial

Dossier – Theories of religion

The Nature and Place of Theory in the Study of Religion/s

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This special dossier of *Horizonte* addresses an issue of central importance to the study of religion/s. This invited editorial essay sets out a series of points intended to illustrate the range of issues relevant to discussing theories of religion. This list is not exhaustive, and space prevents any in-depth analysis. It is also a personal list: it often echoes my own interventions in meta-theoretical debates, as well as those of my friend and frequent collaborator, Michael Stausberg.

A series of distinctions – relative and suggestive – provide a general sense of the meta-theoretical landscape.

First, we should distinguish between theories useful for studying religious phenomena in this or that particular context, and theories specifically *of* or *about* religion. The latter ask five sorts of questions:

1. The nature of religion as a subject matter: reflecting on the concept of “religion” itself, and on related questions of the ontological and epistemic status of the alleged subject matter of the discipline.
2. The specificity of religion(s): what might be special or unique to religion.
3. The origin of religion(s): “factors that contribute to establish the specific properties of religion ... [as] distinguished from ‘beginnings’ ... [and] the historical genealogy of the category ‘religion.’”

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4. The functions of religion(s): with a sensitivity to philosophical and methodological issues in order to avoid simplistic functionalist theories.
5. The structure of religion(s): “whether, how, and possibly also why... elements (aspects, dimensions, components, recurrent patterns, or building blocks) hang together, are parts of joint constructs and attributions, whether they are interdependent (and if so, how) or just arbitrary assemblies.” (STAUSBERG, 2009b, p. 3–6; STAUSBERG; ENGLER, 2016, p. 56–65).

This narrow focus on theories of *religion* is of vital importance to our discipline. That said, I discuss theory in more general terms here and in my contribution to this special dossier (ENGLER, 2019).

It is important to recognize both lay and academic theories: “scholars are by no means the only group of people thinking about religion. Sets of general propositions or theorems interpreting and explaining religion are entertained privately, in thought and conversation, and they permeate the public sphere, including the media and politics” (STAUSBERG, 2009b, p. 7). Academic theories tend to place “greater emphasis on coherence, consistency, formality, explicitness, causality ..., explicit and reflected background assumptions, rationality, exposure to mutual criticism, sensitivity to data, validity and reliability of the data, and testability. Moreover, academic theories aspire to a greater degree of complexity”. (STAUSBERG, 2009b, p. 8).

Disciplinary context is important as well. We should distinguish between, on the one hand, the study of religion/s (religious studies, ciência(s) da religião, sciences religieuses, religionswissenschaft) and, on the other, distinct disciplines that share a substantive focus on religion (theology, along with philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology of religion, etc.). As I argue in my contribution to this special dossier, the disciplinary identity of the study of religion/s is based on much more than what we study and how we study it (see ENGLER; STAUSBERG, 2011). As I have argued elsewhere, “the role of theory in the academic study of religion varies according to historical, national, and institutional contexts,” and disciplinary differences are central here (ENGLER, 2005). My focus in this editorial is on theory in one specific discipline, the study of religion/s.

At the risk of being polemical, it is important to recognize that some scholars of religion/s care about theory but many do not. This special dossier in *Horizonte* represents a minority perspective. As Michael Stausberg (2009b) has underlined, “the study of religion(s) appears to be characterized by an aversion to theory” (STAUSBERG, 2009b, p. 1). Stausberg suggest four reasons for the "reluctance of scholars of religion to engage with theories of religion":

First, theory is usually not emphasized in religious studies programs, nor is theory regarded as a common and promising entry port to an academic career.... Second, many scholars of religion may well feel that the very term ‘religion’ is far too remote and detached from their day-to-day work to be perceived as engaging. In a similar manner, historians and social scientists tend to leave questions such as ‘what is history’ and ‘what is society’ to philosophers. Third, scholars working with empirical methods often struggle to come to terms with the complexity of the phenomena.... The necessary reduction of complexity and messiness of reality that is presupposed and achieved when constructing theories of religion – their necessary detachment from given specific contexts and concrete human beings – can therefore easily be perceived to be irrelevant for the kind of work one typically is engaged in addition to being distorting and “reductionist”. ... Last but not least, certain intellectual developments of the past decades, loosely connected to postmodernism or similar labels, have contributed to raise suspicions both about the very project of theory and the concept of ‘religion’ as the subject area of potential theories of religion. (STAUSBERG, 2010, p. 224–225).¹

To some extent, attention to theory has increased during the last two decades, at least in North America and Europe (see ENGLER, 2004). Employment advertisements increasingly mention expertise in theory. However, these nods to “theory” often seem like empty talk: my impression is that most scholars in the study of religion continue have naive and outdated views of the nature and place of theory. And some sub-disciplines – for example the study of new religious movements – remain resistant to theory, based on a misguided view that “pure” descriptive work is possible and desirable. Hopefully, this special dossier will help contribute to more defensible discussions of and work with theory in our discipline.

¹ See too Stausberg (2009a, p. 12–14).

It is useful to distinguish between theories developed by scholars of religion and theoretical work imported from other disciplines. Here, for example, are the scholars discussed the third edition of Daniel L. Pals' book, *Nine Theories of Religion* (2014), a commonly used textbook in North American classrooms: E.B. Tylor/J.G. Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, William James, Mircea Eliade, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Clifford Geertz. On this list, Eliade is the only scholar of religion/s, in a disciplinary sense. The most useful publication to date on theories of religion, Stausberg's *Contemporary Theories of Religion* (2009a), includes only three theories by scholars of religion/s among the seventeen that are discussed.² The study of religion/s continues to rely primarily on other disciplines for its theoretical approaches and frames. This remains something of an embarrassment: are we not supposedly the experts in this area? Granted that scholars of religion/s have been doing valuable theoretical work in recent decades, it remains an open question whether that work will prove its value to the point that scholars in other disciplines import and use it.

It is essential to distinguish between levels of theory. In my contribution to this special dossier, I argue for a view that sees the relation between data and theory as a spectrum, from more empirical to more abstract extremes. Minimally, it is useful to distinguish between “theoretical approaches, theoretical ideas, and theories,” reflecting “degrees of generalization and explication” (STAUSBERG, 2009b, p. 9). Once we recognize the distinction between different levels of theory, In general terms,

there are two types of theories: those that apply a theoretical apparatus (cognition, evolution, social systems, etc.) to religion; and those that try to elaborate a theoretical apparatus based upon the study of putatively religious phenomena. The former is more top-down, aiming at a general account, and the latter is bottom-up, seeking initially to explain or interpret a given set of empirical phenomena. The latter sort [...] results in theories that are more characteristic of the discipline, as opposed to top-down applications of more general theoretical perspectives. (STAUSBERG; ENGLER, 2016, p. 55).

² For an earlier collection of contributions to theory in the study of religion/s – one also situated in a Brazilian journal – see the special issue of *Rever: Revista de Estudos da Religião*, that I edited (ENGLER, 2005). Unlike Stausberg's book, the focus there was broader than theories of religion.

This is related to various other distinctions. First, it is more useful to think of theorizing as a dynamic process of generating concepts, categories, theories and other analytical devices, than to think of theory as a static conceptual frame to be applied to data. I develop this point in my contribution (see also ENGLER; GARDINER, forthcoming). Second, scholars of religion/s tend to appropriate concepts from published work, applying them to their data or case; but it is often more useful to build theory from a close analysis of data, for example using grounded theory (ENGLER, 2011). Third, in contrast to an approach that attempts to apply a single coherent theoretical frame to the interpretation of a case, it can be useful to use theoretical resources more tactically, using what I have called “theoretical appliqué” [bordado teórico]: “a patchwork approach to theory that uses different conceptual swatches to evoke—rather than rigorously develop—a broader interpretive design ... [by] working with elements of different theoretical perspectives, juxtaposed in a manner that is responsive to the case, not imposed from above like a mold or lens” (ENGLER, 2018, p. 18–19).

Finally, and perhaps most basically, discussions of theory often start with the idea that theory is somehow opposed to practice. This view comes in a variety of flavours: the abstract comparison between theory as form and practice as content; the negative view that theory consists of empty abstraction of little relevance to the “real” work of getting down to cases; or the positive view that practice is blind unless guided by theory, and, hence, likely to achieve little of interest.

All three of these views are based on a flawed premise: that theory can be distinguished sharply from practice. We can see the fallaciousness of this assumption in three ways. First, as I discuss in my contribution, we cannot distinguish sharply between data and theory: data always presuppose prior theorization (if only through their selection as relevant for a given study of “religion”) and theory can serve as data for meta-theoretical discussions. It follows that the practice of an academic discipline – explaining or interpreting data or cases – is inseparably linked with theory from start to finish. Second, scholarly

practice is teleological: it presupposes motivation or purpose, the reason for engaging in the activity at all. And this essential goal-oriented stance is inherently theoretical. We can always ask a scholar why they practice, and their answer – or silence – is haunted by theory, by abstractions regarding the nature of what they are studying, why they are studying it, the results they anticipate achieving, and the value of the entire process. The attempt to distinguish theory from practice reduced to a relative shift in focus, from more abstract to more empirical aspects of the research process. That distinction has heuristic and pedagogical value, but it is best represented in terms of a spectrum of views, not a sharp distinction. Finally, one of the most persuasive arguments of twentieth-century philosophy of language – by W. O. Quine, Donald Davidson and others – is that a sharp distinction between synthetic and analytic, between scheme (form) and content is unsustainable. This relativizes the distinction between data and theory (ENGLER, 2011, p. 266) and along with it the distinction between practice and theory.

In sum, theory and practice are separable in theory but not in practice (irony intended). That is, we can make an analytical split between the two for the sake of argument, but they are necessarily bundled together in the actual research process. Of course, I would be contradicting myself if the reverse were not equally valid: theory and practice are separable in practice but not in theory. That is, thinking of the two as separate can help us navigate the nuts and bolts of the research process and it is useful in the classroom; but meta-theoretical reflection underlines their inseparability.

I hope that this brief and selective overview serves as a reminder that theory should not be taken for granted. Discussions of the nature and place of theory in the study of religion/s are an essential part of our toolbox. Ignoring, minimizing or marginalizing such meta-theoretical issues is, at best, a sign of our discipline's immaturity and, at worst, a sign of inadequate academic training. This editorial essay offers some initial gestures toward more nuanced understandings of theory. Readers will find more food for thought in the articles that make up this special dossier.

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