On the Restraint of Theory

*What did the indigenous informant say to the postmodern anthropologist? Enough about you, let’s talk about me now.*

- David Schneider

Caricatures are funny because they exaggerate the prominent features of their subjects: at the core of their humor is a nugget of truth. Such is the nature of this joke. In the wake of postmodern critique scholarship sometimes evinces such a degree of suspicion regarding explanation and such an acute emphasis on methodological self-reflectivity as to reach a nearly neurotic pitch. And – much as it has often taken its theoretical lead from anthropology in the past – the discipline of religious studies is once again tempted to follow in that field’s footsteps, this time down the rabbit hole of incessant self-critique and obsessive self-doubt of its theoretical integrity.

Theory and theoretical self-consciousness are good things, but one can have too much of a good thing. While both theory and theoretical self-critique (what McCutcheon calls “theory-as-critique”) are necessary in the study of religion (as they are in any academic discipline), both have their proper place, and over-emphasis of either has the potential to stymie scholarship and to dissolve the object/s of the study of religion. While critical awareness of the heuristic, constructed nature of our categories and reflection on the potentialities and limits of theory are indeed necessary, these intellectual practices must themselves be carried out with discipline. Without an anchor in empirics and philosophically sophisticated methods of analysis, theorizing in the study of religion risks degenerating into fictionalizing and omphaloskepsis. Theory, in other words, must be restrained in order to maintain its intellectual integrity. This may be effected by acknowledging two basic features of theory: the inherent limitations of its explanatory power, and its dependency on methods of analysis, including interpretation.
The Limitations of Theory

The first step in formulating an approach to research on religion that is theoretically self-reflective without paralyzing itself through incessant self-critique is to acknowledge that theory is imperfect. Religion – like politics, society, culture, and a host of other academic disciplines – is a constructed category. This is true not only because religion is not a natural type, but because it is constituted by a disparate array of types of phenomena. As such, the expectation that religious studies could coalesce around a single, monolithic theory or even an uncontested set of theories for the explanation of its object is not only unrealistic, but undesirable. First, because the phenomena out of which religion is constructed are so variegated – ranging from behaviors, institutions, experiences, traditions, psychological comportments, discourses, texts, etc. – it is obvious that a range of theories operating at different levels will be necessary to address these different, though typically interrelated, objects of interest. McCutcheon aptly summarizes the point and its disciplinary implications, endorsing an interdisciplinary model that includes multiple theories and which eschews the search for “one metaphysically reductive metatheory.”

Religious studies has always been an interdisciplinary field, and in its early stages the need to pilfer theories from adjacent fields derived largely from the fact that it lacked its own theoretical history. Although religious studies scholars clearly should develop their own theories, to ignore the inherently multidimensional – and therefore interdisciplinary – nature of our object of study is to needlessly hamstring our ability to carry out scholarship. Religious studies should, and will, continue to cross-pollinate theory with related disciplines, just as they should, and will, cross-pollinate with ours.

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1 McCutcheon, 210
2 Interdisciplinarity does not rule out consilience, or the “vertical integration” for which scholars such as Slingerland have called. Depending on how such a model of the interrelations between theories at different levels of analysis is deployed, it could either constrain scholarship or indicate productive paths of research.
Secondly, because the phenomena we study under the umbrella term “religion” are not immutable Platonic forms but socially embedded practices that operate through historically situated consciousnesses, it is equally obvious that our theories will need to change over time. The notion that religion consists of some kind of unchanging, ahistorical essence has been thoroughly and repeatedly thrashed by a host of contemporary scholars. If the “religion as essence” party has ended, the expectation of a final and comprehensive “theory of religion” is a hang-over from it. Because the collection of phenomena we study change through history, the tools we use to study that collection must also change. “Religion,” after all, is not merely an academic term of art, but is now an element of many popular lexicons. The boundaries that define what qualifies as religion (over which we continue to debate anyway) are therefore fluid and shifting. It is when a discipline reaches consensus about its theories and methods that intellectual stagnation sets in and disciplinary irrelevance becomes a real possibility. Therefore, what some see as theoretical instability, I see as adaptability; what some see as theoretical disarray I see as intellectual vitality. If theories must be disciplined through continual self-interrogation and empirical testing, dynamism and debate concerning theory are not signs of intellectual confusion and disorder, but evidence of the healthy continuance of that disciplining process.

It is also the case that our theoretically-informed endeavors to study, understand, and explain – no matter how rigorously refined – are always imperfect representations of reality. In the act of observing, selecting, and analyzing phenomena, those phenomena themselves are altered:

3 The predominance of rational choice theory in economics is a foreboding example.
The impact of post-Kantian social constructionism and a wave of critical theories that have moved through the Arts and Humanities (namely third wave feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, queer theory etc), has been to highlight the ways in which the object of study is itself constructed in the act of examination itself...the kind of object one considers “religion” to be and the kinds of claims one makes about that object is significantly determined by the disciplinary lens and formative assumptions that ground that analysis in the first place.5

The comfortable Enlightenment assumption that, if disciplined and applied properly, the human mind could attain “truth” simpliciter has been thoroughly undermined by a range of philosophical and theoretical insights: that subjectivity is always historically constructed; that theory is always contextually situated and influenced; that the interests and assumptions that guide inquiry operate in pervasive and often unacknowledged ways. These realizations are valuable, and suggest that a certain degree of humility with regard to the power of theory is not only advisable, but necessary. It is only in recognition of these and other impinging factors that scholars can manifest the self-reflectivity required to maintain intellectual integrity. Once these factors are recognized, however, measures can be taken to at least diminish their tainting influence on research and analysis.

The possibility of mitigating these influences, however, is eliminated once they are taken to undermine entirely the possibility of empirical falsification. The acknowledgment that theory is always at one remove from the phenomena we seek to explain by it can be taken too far. Wendy Brown depicts the precipitous edge at which theory operates:

As a meaning-making enterprise, theory depicts a world that does not quite exist, that is not quite the world we inhabit. But this is theory's incomparable value, not its failure. Theory does not simply decipher the meanings of the world but recodes and rearranges them in order to reveal something about the meanings and incoherencies that we live with...Theory violates the self-representation of things in order to represent those things and their relation—the world—differently. Thus, theory is never “accurate” or “wrong”; it is only more or less illuminating, more or less provocative, more or less of an incitement to thought, imagination, desire, possibilities for renewal.6

Theory does indeed “depict a world that does not quite exist”: it selects, organizes, and prioritizes phenomena in ways that are not found in the natural world; it proposes causative processes that are not immediately apparent; it posits the existence of orders and patterns that typically do not reveal themselves to naked observation. This does not, however, excuse theory from the demand for accuracy; provocation and imagination, on one hand, and illumination and insight, on the other, are different things. While a theoretical claim might be provocative in its implications and imaginative in its novelty, it is only significant – illuminative and insightful – insofar as it can be shown to be relevant to that to which it refers, insofar as what it claims can be assessed in terms of those phenomena it purports to explain. Illumination must shed light on something, and insight must see into something. If theory consists in explanation – identifying the causes, origins, and/or functions of religion – then it is only relevant insofar as the causes, origins, and/or functions that it proposes can be shown to have some relevant relation with the actual phenomena we identify as religion.

To the extent that a theory fails to account for observed features of those phenomena that it seeks to explain, that theory may be described as incomplete; if it fails to produce any claims at all that withstand empirical falsification (or which are unfalsifiable), that theory may be described as wrong (or empty). Acknowledgment of the fact that theory does not produce an exact representation of the world that it seeks to explain does not imply that the scholar enjoys unconstrained poetic license, but that she is faced with a continual task of revision and refinement. What Bruce Lincoln says about language is equally true of theory: “Cognizant of the fact that language is neither the world, nor its reflection, but an imperfect instrument with which one engages (and sometimes distorts and sometimes remakes) the world, I struggle to define key terms with a certain precision and rigor, continuing to rethink
and revise my usage as its inadequacies and flaws become clear.”7 The very possibility that inadequacies and flaws may be recognized and that rethinking and revision may be performed demonstrates that theory, like language, is beholden to something outside itself, accountable to a standard of assessment that is not itself the product of theory. The scholarly text is not “a discourse of free invention, wherein ideological interests escape all controls,” but a discourse that must be grounded in and held accountable to empirics, and where ideological interests are disciplined – as much as they can be – in light of observational, textual, and other kinds of evidence.8

In its more extravagant moods postmodern suspicion of claims to objectivity swing the pendulum from the extreme of early modern overconfidence in the powers of Reason to the other skeptical extreme of pure discursive recreation and ungrounded conjecture. On one hand is the likely unattainable ideal of unvarnished and comprehensive truth, a perfect representation of a world taken to be essentially rational in itself; on the other is the concession of any and all claims to empirical relevance and the retreat into a shadowy, solipsistic realm of unaccountable speculation. Theory must strike a balance between these extremes: its inability to satisfy the demands of the former does not justify dissolution into the latter. Theory will always be subject to its own limitations, as the result of a variety of factors, including our inability to transcend history and the limits of our powers of self-awareness. To concede entirely the need for empirical accountability and falsifiability, however, is not only to dissolve the very possibility of academic research, but is simply unnecessary. Through the kind of deliberate and careful self-reflectivity for which many have been calling, as well as peer-review and other ongoing conversations of academic dialogue, we can at least partially rectify the limitations of the theories that we use and our ability to

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deploy them. Because theories claim to explain empirical phenomena and typically suggest predictable results, they can and should be weighed and measured through observation of the world that they claim to explain. And through multidisciplinary research, the omissions and blind spots of particular theories and disciplines can be ameliorated by deploying the tools of other theories and disciplines.

Recognition of the imperfection of theory – even if that imperfection is inevitable and can never be fully rectified – does not mandate abandoning either theory itself or the demand that a theory’s value be determined by its applicability and accountability to the intersubjective world about which it makes claims. The map may not be the territory, but a map that leads you to Knoxville when you’re trying to get to Denver is demonstrably inferior to one that brings you at least to the Colorado state line. Recognition of the imperfection of theory acknowledges that theorizing is and likely will remain a work in progress, a project in need of continual revision as the phenomena theory seeks to explain transform through history, as existing tools of investigation (technological and otherwise) are improved and new ones developed, as interdisciplinary cross-pollination produces new and hybrid approaches to research, and as the empirically demonstrated failures of theory’s explanatory power are rectified through revision and reflection. By remaining vigilant to when and how our constructed theories and categories misrepresent intersubjectively available facts or fail to account for observed patterns of phenomena, we enable ourselves to revise them when necessary.9 Admitting that such revision will in all likelihood always be necessary transforms the “failure” of theory into the opportunity for theoretical innovation and improvement.

Empirics and Interpretation

The kind of theoretical change I describe (dare I call it progress?) is only possible through the self-reflective use of empirics – specifically, empirics that are not themselves the products of theory. If theories are supported or falsified through empirical analysis, then theory cannot itself be the mechanism of that analysis. Otherwise, theories would be validated by their own products and theoretical explanations would be nothing more than self-fulfilling prophecies. Research is therefore in need of another mechanism by which data may be analyzed. Interpretation is one means by which this need is fulfilled. It is a method for analyzing data, the products of which theory then seeks to explain.\(^\text{10}\)

This suggests an important distinction between interpretation and theory, and the respective goals of those processes: “…interpretations and descriptions…do not constitute a theory of religion but something more akin to an interpretation of the meaning of a religion for the devotee or that member of another religion.”\(^\text{11}\) Interpretation – historically grounded and empirically accountable disclosure of the meaning of religious phenomena (experiences, practices, behavior, doctrines, etc.) for the religious subject – neither relies on nor implicates theory; the scholar’s interpretation of religious phenomena does not itself propose (or rule out) causes, functions, or origins for those religious phenomena that he studies. Rather, interpretation reveals the meaning of religious phenomena for the religious subject, which the scholar seeks to understand and then to explain.

Interpretation is necessary precisely because the significance or relevance of many religious activities, attitudes, and artifacts does not reveal itself immediately; it is only by discerning the meaning of such phenomena that they may be accurately understood and categorized in (constructed) ways that facilitate comparison and explanation. Interpretation is only necessary in those cases where the meaning of a religious phenomenon – i.e., its significance for religious consciousness – is relevant. For instance, human bodies can often

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\(^\text{10}\) In this sense interpretation may be compared to the statistical analysis of data sets or the performance of an experiment in a laboratory.

\(^\text{11}\) McCutcheon, 209. See also 212.
be seen engaging in the following actions: descending from an upright position to a kneeling one; closing the eyes; clasping the hands and/or sometimes bowing from the kneeling position; speaking despite the absence of a publicly observable audience. These actions are often, though not always, performed in predictable patterns, either at certain times of the day or in specific locations.

These are all intersubjectively observable phenomena, and, described as such, neither theory nor interpretation has yet been performed. To label and categorize this set of actions as “prayer” is already to make certain claims about them. Although such categorization is useful (indeed, likely necessary) to facilitate explanation and comparison, that categorization – which implicitly depends on interpretation – cannot itself be carried out through the application of a theory that seeks to explain these actions. For example, historian Maurice Bloch has argued that the form in which some people pray can be explained as the transference of a routinized behavior from the social-political realm of feudal Europe to religious practice. The physical motions of kneeling and folding the hands together mirror the gestures by which feudal vassals pledged fealty to their lords. Bloch suggests that the relation of humanity to divinity is modeled on the feudal relation of vassal and lord, and thereby explains the transference of this practice to the form of (some) prayer.12

That is a plausible explanation. However, using that theoretical explanation as a guide to interpretation is problematic. Doing so would preemptively narrow the range of possible meanings for prayer to those implied by the theory – in this case, meanings such as obedience, loyalty, and a desire for protection. These very well may be the meanings of prayer, but what we commonly describe as “prayer” could also entail a range of other meanings or intentions: propitiation, confession, communion, incantation, thanksgiving, praise, etc. If the activity of prayer is interpreted through the historical explanation offered by

12 qtd. in Strenski, 15-16
Bloch, then the meaning attributed to it is constructed through his theory, and that theory is then “confirmed” in a merely tautological fashion: because the explanation is used to construct the meaning of the activity, the explanation turns out to be perfectly suited and comprehensive. Rather than testing the theory against the empirical data that it seeks to explain, the theory achieves confirmation essentially unchecked because the data against which it could be tested have already been constituted by the theory itself: a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Therefore, it is necessary that data be obtained and analyzed through a mechanism that is independent of theory. The difficulty with fulfilling this methodological requirement with regard to the study of religion is that many of the phenomena in which we are interested become relevant and interesting largely through means that are not publicly observable: the consciousness of the religious subject. In order to disclose the meaning of the observed phenomena – in order to recognize the acts of kneeling and speaking to a non-empirical audience as “prayer” and to discern the meaning of that behavior – the consciousness of the subject who engages in that activity must be brought into the analytical process. In other words, the intersubjectively available data must be interpreted:

The first goal – and the one that must be included in any academic study of religions – is to describe religious beliefs, practices, experiences, and institutions accurately, which is to say, to identify them in a way that captures how they are understood by the practitioners themselves. Since religious phenomena are human phenomena, to describe a religious belief, practice, experience, or institution accurately requires reference to the agents’ selfunderstanding. In other words, to describe what the agent holds, does, feels, or joins accurately, one must include what she understands herself to be holding, doing, feeling, or joining.\textsuperscript{13}

Note Schilbrack’s statement that “religious phenomena are human phenomena.”

Interpretation need not – indeed, cannot – attempt to disclose the meaning of posited non-empirical realities themselves. Assuming that such entities exist (a very large assumption

itself), they are not available for the kind of empirically grounded and historically informed investigation that is required for academic analysis. And in any case, such entities are typically experienced in a range of ways, giving rise to a multiplicity of humanly-ascribed meanings rather than a single, transcendent meaning. What the religion scholar studies are human phenomena: prayer, pilgrimage, rituals, institutions, beliefs, etc. These are publicly available phenomena (or at least they may be rendered as such) and therefore legitimate subjects of academic analysis precisely because interpretation of them is based on intersubjectively available grounds, and theories that seek to explain them can be weighed and measured against that evidence.

Note also that Schilbrack calls for “accurate” description or interpretation. Interpretive processes are not ungrounded speculations or intuitions about the meanings of religious phenomena; rather, they are historically informed and empirically grounded attempts to disclose the meaning of religious phenomena as they are constructed and experienced by human subjects. Interpretation therefore relies on and is accountable to evidence: the discourse of the religious subject, her observed behaviors and gestures, close textual exegesis, etc. Interpretation reveals the meaning of the religious phenomena as constructed, understood, and experienced by religious consciousness. It ensures that what theory explains is not its own pure creation, but instead the actual phenomena of religion, “actual” in this case referring to the meaning and significance of religious phenomena as they are created and undergone by historically-situated religious consciousnesses.

The difference between washing and baptism, killing and sacrifice, traveling and pilgrimage, “turns on the views of the agents” who engage in these behaviors.14 In such cases, the necessity of interpretation that reveals the subjective perspective may be aptly demonstrated by considering the difference between a wink and a blink. Gilbert Ryle claimed

14 Schilbrack, 180
that there is an “immense but unphotographable difference” between the two.\textsuperscript{15} Edward Slingerland disputes that claim. Citing the different neural pathways and muscles involved in such subtle but significant differences as that between a spontaneous (authentic) smile and a forced (inauthentic) one, and specific cognitive mechanisms that have evolved over millennia that enable human beings to effectively detect deceit in other human beings, Slingerland argues that the difference between a wink and a blink \textit{is} accessible to third-person analysis. He concedes, however, that “the larger meaning of a particular wink—Why is this person winking at me? What should I do?—is embedded in a set of long, complex stories, and that for the unpacking and analysis of these stories we require the higher-level expertise of anthropologists, novelists, and historians.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words: interpretation. It is possible to concede Slingerland’s point that there are indeed physical, detectable differences between a wink and a blink while also acknowledging (as Slingerland does) that there is another way in which the two differ: the former has meaning (the subtle communication of some sort of conspiratorial intention) while the latter does not. Recognition of that particular kind of difference – which is certainly not irrelevant – and discerning the meaning of it depend on understanding the consciousness of the agent involved.

This also suggests that while causal explanations employing scientific theories such as those derived from cognitive science are necessary, they do not offer all the tools needed for a comprehensive analysis of religion; what Nancy Frankenberry calls “semantic questions” (or questions of meaning) will have to be explained by theories of a different order – “forms of explanation that make reference to human beliefs, intentions, desires, etc.”\textsuperscript{17} It is specifically research into such semantic questions that depends on interpretation. An art


historian researching the materials and methods of ceramics-making in Sub-Saharan Africa likely need not understand the meaning of the symbols carved on the pottery he studies; the religious studies scholar who seeks to explain the perdurance or cross-cultural diffusion of the cosmogonic themes embedded in the myth recounted by those symbols does.

This delegation of duties and the distinction between interpretation and (theoretically driven) explanation does, of course, imply that such a distinction can be drawn. Robert Segal, Craig Martin, and many others have objected that any interpretation already includes an at least implicit explanation, and that therefore this distinction ultimately cannot be sustained.\(^{18}\)

It is true that the religious subject’s understanding of his own experience, behavior, or practices inevitably includes some at least implicit explanatory claims. For instance, a religious subject might understand his avoidance of shellfish, his rejection of same-sex marriage, or his endorsement of environmentally sustainable energy policy as fulfilling the will of God. In such cases interpretation of religious consciousness will unavoidably refer to explanatory claims on the part of the religious subject – for example, claims that God exists, created the earth, and intended human beings to be stewards of the planet. These explanatory claims cannot be separated from the religious subject’s self-understanding without radically altering the belief, practice, or experience that one seeks to study.

In this particular way, interpretation cannot therefore be separated from explanation: a religious explanation is unavoidably embedded in any accurate interpretation of religious consciousness. This is not, however, the stumbling block it is typically taken to be. After all, the religious subject’s explanation for his behavior and beliefs is very likely part of what the scholar wants to interpret and explain. Interpretation must therefore disclose that emic explanation in order to make it available for theoretical (etic) analysis, which can (and often

does) legitimately deploy explanations that contradict those of the religious subject. In this particular manner, the intertwined nature of interpretation and explanation is not a problem for interpretation, but rather an indication of its necessity. The intertwined nature of interpretation and explanation at this juncture also demonstrates why the scholar’s own explanatory theory – particularly if it is naturalistic – must be restrained in the interpretive phase of analysis. Precisely because the scholar’s explanation is at odds with that embedded in the religious subject’s self-understanding, use of the former to interpret the latter inevitably reconfigures the data under analysis, obfuscating or tainting the phenomenon he seeks to study. In other words, the use of theory to interpret the data that theory then seeks to explain not only results in tautological (and therefore meaningless) self-confirmation; it does so by corrupting the data.

Therefore, in interpreting a religious phenomenon the scholar must acknowledge the embedded explanatory claims on the part of the religious subject. Acknowledgment is not, however, endorsement. Interpretation only oversteps the boundary into covert theologizing or apologetics when – after having produced a historically and empirically grounded understanding of the meaning of a religious phenomenon – it then goes on to deny the legitimacy of etic explanatory endeavors that reject the explanatory claims embedded in the phenomenon itself. As I have argued elsewhere, this is neither necessary nor legitimate for interpretation. It is precisely the scholar’s intention to study and understand the consciousness of the other – without endorsing his (explicit and implicit) explanatory claims – that distinguishes her perspective from that of the religious subject.

Interpretation therefore aids the explanatory endeavor of theory in two regards. First, it keeps theory honest by ensuring that that which theory explains is not merely its own creation. By revealing the emic meaning of religious phenomena including behaviors,

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practices, and experiences, interpretation facilitates analysis of that which theory seeks to explain. It is a method by which phenomena are analyzed as data. The understanding thereby achieved by interpretation is valuable in itself, merely in virtue of the fact that religious phenomena are now better understood (i.e., their meaning for religious consciousness is grasped). Second, the analysis performed through interpretation serves as a test for the applicability, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of theory. A theory’s success or failure is determined by how thoroughly and accurately it explains the data it seeks to explain. Because interpretation analyzes those data independently of theory, it ensures that theory does not descend into circularity by proposing explanations of artifacts that it has itself produced. In this way, theories may be winnowed according to their ability to account for the data they address.

**Conclusion**

In contemporary engagements in “theory and method,” it very well may be that the fate of religious studies hangs in the balance. Recognition of the necessity of theoretical self-reflection, critique, and development is essential for the preservation of the discipline of religious studies and progress in it. Concurrent with this recognition, however, must also be acknowledgment of both the possibilities and limitations of theory. The field of religious studies is currently rife with debate and criticism; it is not only presently better off for it, but will benefit from continued debate and criticism. Rather than seeking for a unified “theory of religion” or even for broad theoretical consensus, religion scholars should instead seek to foster rigorous self-critique and dialogue, and intellectually vital multidisciplinarity: the varied nature of the phenomena with which we engage, the development of new tools and techniques for studying them, and the inevitability of historical change in those phenomena all but guarantee that theory will always be a work in progress.
That reflection and self-critique, however, must also be disciplined themselves. Unless theory remains ultimately beholden to empirics – both seeking to explain and being assessed by intersubjectively available evidence – it becomes ungrounded speculation and solipsistic fictionalizing. Self-awareness of the artificial and constructed nature of our theories and categories (including that most basic and controversial one, “religion”) serves to improve analytical precision and disciplinary flexibility. Taken too far, however, academic self-analysis becomes lost in a maze of funhouse mirrors. Disciplining theory entails not only self-critique, but empirical accountability. That basic standard of empirical grounding and accountability applies not only to theory as a tool of explanation, but to interpretation as a method of data analysis. Because many of those phenomena we categorize and study as religion become relevant through the medium of consciousness, interpretation is a necessary method of analysis. Like theory, however, interpretation remains grounded in historical, intersubjectively available evidence. Constrained as a method for the analysis of data which are then explained through theory, interpretation has an essential role to play in the analytical endeavor we denote “religious studies” by both facilitating and disciplining theory.
Works Consulted


