

Introduction: Understanding Theories of Religion Is Better than Just Being Critical

A New Kind of Method and Theory Book

This is not “your mother or father’s” method and theory book. Thinkers who made a big difference in the way we study religion today still lead the way, but with a difference. Competent as several other theory books may be, I feel they leave us uninformed about how and why our leading theories came to be. Yes, we all want to know what’s *wrong* with a theory. But should we be satisfied with just cutting up a theory? What about how a theory was woven together, built up, brick by brick, and so on? Unless we get deep inside the minds of theorists – unless we really *understand* them – we cannot hope to do them and the high-order act of theorizing justice. I believe that unless we know why they thought they were right we risk making an empty academic game of the study of theories of religion. Finally, the approach I have been trying to teach in this book entails asking why a theorist thought they were right in going down a certain path. Answers to this question may, in turn, arise from considerations internal to a line of thinking, typically to the world of ideas circulating in a certain field of study or academic profession. But the external context of a thinker’s life – the political, cultural, social, religious world in which they live – may

also incline a theorist to think they were right to advance a given theoretical idea.

In the preface to this second edition, I also mentioned recognizing major epistemological breaks in theorizing, such as that between modern and post-modern. I shall argue that theories develop dialectically, according to a logic worked out in history. Theories “speak” to other theories in a kind of conversation with one another. In this light, I am arguing that the new chapters of Part IV on race, feminism, and post-colonialism carry on the conversation theorists in the study of religion have been having for the past 400 years. The story of theory in our field is not, then, a piecemeal and unhistorical serialization of theories, as if they pop up one at a time, here and there, and in no particular relation to one another. What makes the history of theories of religion in the West like none other is the existence of this centuries-long conversation. Thus, while it is vital to recognize classic thinkers from Muslim, Indian, or Chinese civilizations who took a critical, and often comparative, look at religion, their efforts did not add up to a *tradition* of critical and comparative study of religion. They shot across a sky of discourse like blazing comets, burning brightly, soon to flame out. They failed to ignite the kind of centuries-long controversies that are

the stuff of the study of religion as we have come to know it in the West. I am finally, then, arguing that the key to a good theory book is finding the connecting threads in that long conversation. Both *Thinking about Religion* and, now, *Understanding Theories of Religion* do this by calling attention to the historical dialectic at work shaping the production of theories of religion.

In treating theories of religion, I am convinced that we have an enormous amount to learn, not only about the past, but also about how we should study religion today. By seeing how our field came about from its classic historical beginnings, we situate ourselves within a long, meandering stream of thinking reaching back to the dawn of the modern era. This takes us back to the childhood of religious studies, a time when people were just discovering the different religions for the first time. What was it like in the minds of our field's heroes when they met religions unknown up to that point? What was it like when many heretofore unknown peoples of the world first came to know each other? What was it like at first contact? The original edition, *Thinking about Religion*, told us about these first and subsequent contacts. Working away, mostly in secret, to avoid religious persecution, early modern theorist Jean Bodin put together the first dialogue of religions where the religions spoke to each other as *equals*. Assembling believers of many different sorts – not only Christians and Jews, but Muslims too, Bodin let them challenge the credentials and validity of each other's claims to the truth. Just think what Bodin would have done had he known of the Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, and Australian or African native folk, as later modern or post-modern theorists would? But Bodin had had no contact with them. We had not yet introduced ourselves to each other. By the eighteenth century, our theorists represent thinkers who had now had that further contact with the many other peoples of the world. Friedrich Max Müller made the religions of India his specialty, and put forward his broad comparative theory of religion that embraced India and the West under one single rubric. How different then from Bodin's was this new world that Max Müller opened up, when he extended the study of religion to the religions of India? That first contact, as we will see, exploded conventional thinking about the nature of religion in ways we have still perhaps not yet

digested. Max Müller spoke of an "Aryan Bible," and threw open questions about the uniqueness of Abrahamic revelation like none before him. Students still query whether Buddhism can be called a religion, because a god does not occupy its center. Another first contact, here with the archeological remains of the Neolithic ancestors of modern peoples, drove the efforts of anthropologists like E. B. Tylor or Sir James Frazer. Not only did they seek to extend the history of humanity far beyond contemporary imaginings, but their progressive evolutionary vision of the human past reacted dialectically to Max Müller's diffusionist story of humanity's decline from a religious golden age.

In this new edition, I update the results of those earlier first contacts and incorporate post-modern approaches – in a broad sense of the term – in Part IV. Doing so permits us to have what we might call dialectical second looks at the entire archive of data of the study of religion given us by the classic modernist theorists, but now through eyes of the post-modern critics of modernist theory. In a way, the entirety of Part IV can be read as a systematic taking apart of the foundations upon which the major theorists of the past have stood – especially the modernists Weber, Freud, Malinowski, Durkheim, and Eliade.

These newly added chapters on post-modern theories of religion showcase a clear and thorough dialectic reaction to the modernist theoretical trends of the past. These primarily deal with religion in terms of issues that particularly vex us in ways ignored by modernist theories. Against modernist claims of scientific objectivity and neutrality, the post-modernists assert a concern for human dignity, social justice, and the victims of a globalized world. Themes such as power, race, sex/gender, and global social justice run through these theories like a bright red thread. Post-modern theorists would, accordingly, be prompted to raise such questions as whether, for example, Tylor would have referred to the folk of traditional societies as "savages" or "primitive" had he not been comfortably ensconced in the seat of imperial power. Or would Eliade have written of "religious *man*" had he been more sensitive to the way classic theorists overlooked sex/gender in the make-up of the religious world? In reaching all the way back to the past and concluding with the present, theorizing

about religion shows both longevity and vitality. We own a marvelously rich tradition of scholarship. Like some luxurious oriental carpet, theory in the study of religion has, over many centuries, been woven together out of a dialectical arrangement of contrasting and complementary intellectual threads into something rich.

There is also a second way this method and theory book departs from conventional ways of studying theories. I absolutely *love* theory and theorizing. I think it is one of the finest acts we can perform as thinkers. But it is not a game. Therefore, to me, doing theory is not just the analysis of ideas, or a contest to see who is the sharpest knife in the drawer. It is about showcasing a worldview, telling an important story, engaging an often dramatic clash of ideas. As such, theories have their “internal” and “external” contexts. They are formed within an internal intellectual context of a disciplinary or academic craft, where one member of the craft speaks to another. At some point, musicians or mathematicians can only talk to other musicians or mathematicians, because only a narrow sliver of humanity can master their refined, specialized languages. Nevertheless, musicians *perform* for audiences, often illiterate in their special language: music *connects* because it taps into larger emotional networks, external to the disciplined world of the musician. What makes music work is its ability to connect with the totality of human life external to the special language of music. That is why I also insist upon studying the formation of theories within a wider, external, context defined by the political, religious, sexual, esthetic worlds that we all inhabit.

Beyond saying what a theory is, the study of theories of religion is about accounting for how and why theories actually came to be. Part of my answer to this question of how theories came to be resides in life itself. That is why I have brought in the external context of theorizing – the network of politics, religion, esthetics, etc., – that often weighs on theorists in the formation of their theories. Theories, thus, emerge to some degree from attempts to make sense of the world and our place in it. More than just smart, a good theory also evinces wisdom and wide experience of life in all its diversity. Theories have implications beyond the classroom or seminar, shaping the way we see life overall. Thus, theories and

worldviews are often hard to tell apart. Malinowski, for example, wrote some of the first books about sexual practices among faraway tribal folk, but he was also active in the early days of Planned Parenthood. Do we really think we could – or should – separate these “external” interests in sex from his overall “internal” intellectual and professional theoretical perspective on religion? I don’t think so. In my chapter on Malinowski, readers will discover why.

Teachers are always pleased if students are smart about theories, and can master their logic. Jumping through the mental hoops of explaining a theory and pointing out its strengths and weaknesses are basic skills. But I look for more than cleverness in a student, more than the ability to rack up good scores in an exam, or even to get the right answer. I look for students ready to study theory in quite another spirit. I look for students moved by real curiosity who try to understand why theorists thought they were right about their theoretical proposals. In brief, I look for students who want to understand theory and theorists! This book will invite students to dive into the lives and times of theorists to see how theories emerged from a picture of why they thought certain ideas were “right.” Let’s begin.

From Religion to the “Problems of Religion”

Understanding Theories of Religion takes its stand squarely on the importance of understanding how and why people have come to *think* about religion, and how they try variously to understand or explain it. Everybody knows that people can often be passionate, even violently so, about religion, either for or against. Many Christians feel that the imperative to “preach the gospel to all nations” weighs heavily upon them. That is why is, along with Buddhism, Christianity is the most successful of all missionary religions. For these Christians, religion is so charged with emotion that it bubbles over in zealous energy to proselytize. But someone might note that powerful emotions do not accompany the missionizing enterprise of Buddhism, nor is its spread impelled by a strong imperative. Instead, Buddhists get especially emotional when they feel under threat of attack or elimination. Protecting the key

Buddhist institutions, such as the *Sangha*, then becomes an overriding imperative. This book too lives by passion. In the theorists we study, I want to convey their thirst to know and understand, their reckless lust for truth and obsession with curiosity. I want us as well to experience for ourselves something of their relentless impulse to question and doubt.

People may have been believers or just have “lived” their religions from time immemorial. But the characters in this book were the first who subjected religion to questioning and curiosity. They submitted religion to endless systematic interrogation in the quest to understand and explain this seemingly unexplainable and mysterious aspect of life. In a way, they truly made “religion” emerge. What, for example, was the first religion? How does it compare to the religions of our day? Are there religions elsewhere than in the West? Or is religion a univocal, culturally-specific term that cannot be employed outside the West? How has religion been employed as means of resistance to domination? How does a religion articulate with the nation-state? Does religion change – say, according to any regular principles that we might discover, such as evolution or degeneration? Is religion essentially private or instead essentially social (Strenski 2003)? The attempt to solve these and similar problems marks the beginning of what we call *theories*. This is not to say that in the spotty history of human curiosity these questions never occurred to believers. It is only to say that until fairly recently there were no major books or treatises, no sustaining institutions or “schools,” no lasting cultural influences in the forms of lines of inquiry or major questions about religion. And as schools of mathematics and the scientific study of language developed first in ancient India, and not in, say, Frankish Europe, so also was it in the West that the study of religion as we know it came to be. The study of religion came to be because religion itself became the object of questions and problems in some sustained way. That is why this book places so much emphasis on *understanding* theories and theorists: why did they think they were right?”

British cultural critic Terry Eagleton catches the spirit of our book. He explains that the appearance of theories indicates the existence of perceived “problems” – that “something is amiss.” Problems

of religion pop up like those dreaded small bumps on the neck, warning us that all is not well in the religious world (Eagleton 1990). Theories aim to fix these problems by explaining how and why they occur. In the modern West, we have experienced a rash of such questioning and what Eagleton calls “a really virulent outbreak of theory,” something indeed “on an epidemic scale” (Eagleton 1990). This epidemic of problems of religion has ignited intense theorizing about religion that has conspicuously engaged practically every major Western thinker of any note since the 1500s – Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Max Müller, Freud, and, into our own day, figures like Ninian Smart, Charles Long, Caroline Walker Bynum, or Bruce Lincoln. *Understanding Theories of Religion* is about trying to understand and explain this “epidemic” of theorizing about religion. What are the reasons – intellectual, social, and cultural – why the great figures in the study of religion bothered to theorize about religion? Why did these thinkers believe that they were right in giving their particular answers to the many problems of religion?

Like other aspects of life, such as society, culture, art, and economic concerns, religion became the object of a disciplined academic program of self-reflection – what can be called “science.” Only in the past century and a half has there been anything called a “science of religion.” Although we tend not to use the term these days, it is still the normal way the study of religion is identified, for example in France, where the *sciences religieuses* can claim a solid history of over a century and a half. Likewise, in the German-speaking world under its formidable-sounding title, *Religionswissenschaft* holds sway, as it does in the Netherlands, as we will see, in the title of the Dutch scholar Cornelis P. Tiele’s major work, *Elements of the Science of Religion*, itself inspired by Max Müller’s project for a “Science of Religion” at Oxford. All these represent major and deliberate efforts to go beyond belief, and even to go beyond everyday curiosity about religion. If this situation were otherwise, we would have to explain why the documentary evidence for a “natural” or much earlier disciplined and systematic study of religion is simply non-existent.

Until the time thinkers started studying religion in order to understand and explain it, studying religion was the main business of the religions

themselves. Their intellectual efforts served the special needs of religious communities. Shakers, for example, worried about how they might expand their membership. Muslims meditated about whether their chief leadership should be confined to blood relatives of Muhammad. Roman Catholics disputed among themselves about how to deal with the role of women and the like.

While the problems that the individual religions wrestled with were real problems, they were “in-house” problems. They were not the kind of problems that mattered to any and all religions, or for religion *as religion*. Shakers, Muslims, or Catholics may well have had their problems, but they were those only afflicting Shakers, Muslims, and Catholics, respectively. As such, the answers offered for their problems were not like scientific theories, since they did not need to appeal to the broad range of human belief and experience. Shakers did not have to satisfy Catholics about the answer they gave to their own “in-house” Shaker problems, and vice versa. But the theories we will study did need to speak across sectarian and religious lines. These theories needed to speak about issues of understanding and explaining. They had to appeal to the broadest consensus about the nature of facts, evidence, and such that they could. The new studies of religion had therefore to be in some sense objective and subjective at the same time. *Subjective* states and experiences were part of the data of religion. Visions of Jesus were data as much as a lock of his hair. The study of religion was *objective* in the sense that anyone of any religious persuasion, in principle, could agree on what the data were. Jesus may or many not be Lord, but the date of his birth is a datum. Flowing from this ideal of a common world of data, the study of religion was *comparative* in the sense that no religion could be privileged, and all religious facts mattered equally.

But Why Did They Think That They Were Right?

My way of tying the great theorists together is to ask each of them, in effect, *why they thought they were right* about the answers they gave the problems of religion. Why were their theories the right ones? In this way, *Understanding Theories of Religion* differs fundamentally from most other

treatments of theories in the study of religion. Most other treatments are obsessed with showing why the great theorists were *wrong*. While this volume is critical about the major theories, it is more than that. I concentrate on why they thought they were right because I think we can learn much more by this approach than by a relentlessly negative one. This does not mean that I am a relativist who believes that all theories and methods are equally true. There are real flaws in any theory. But I have yet to meet the perfect “Prince Charming” of theories that waits to carry us off to some intellectual paradise. In the absence of this charming Prince, and since making the flaws in theories our main preoccupation is sterile, I have opted for another way. Once we get over the idea of a Prince Charming and once we have exposed the weakness or fatal flaws of a theory, what have we finally accomplished? Do we draw the conclusion that theorizing is a relatively worthless activity, since any theory can have holes shot in it? Do we scorn theorizing in the same way biblical Creationists disparage Darwinian evolution, because it is, after all, “only a theory”? Or, if we still think theorizing may be a worthy activity, what have we learnt about how theories actually come to be – and thus perhaps how we ourselves might construct them – merely by shooting holes in them, or by cutting them up? Every course in methods and theories that I know seems to conclude by leaving a trail of wreckage – a littered scene of disabled or terminated theories breathing their last. Is this what we really want as the end result of our critical inquiry into theories of religion? *Understanding Theories of Religion* was written and conceived in the belief that those who value theorizing in the study of religion want *more*.

Leading Questions: On Seeing Both the Forest and the Trees

This “more” is to deepen our understanding of theorizing as an embedded activity. What did the great theorists want to achieve – even when they failed to achieve it? This “more” involves delving into the contexts of the creation and formation of theories, so that we can begin to see what the theorists were really trying to achieve. As such, this effort at understanding

theories of religion essentially entails an approach to theorizing about religion as a historical enterprise. The classic thinkers of Part I sought first to uncover by repeated historical searches Natural Religion, conceived as the “first” religion, or the origin of religion. The answers given in the quest for Natural Religion by the first wave of great theorists dominate the polemic of Part I. The second thing the classic thinkers sought to do was to address the central problem of the ultimate nature and status of religious *experience*. Was there some common psychological denominator of all religions, some fundamental human capacity for religiousness, analogous to a moral sensibility or the esthetic sense? Here, the historical quest for an absolute beginning point has been abandoned in favor of attempts to explain what essential religious experience was. Was it some sort of absolute dependence upon a great power, often constituting the essence of the reports of encounters with the sacred by believers, to be taken at face value? Or, as Freud would suggest, are we not rather in the presence of mythologized versions of our childhood memories of parental power? Or again, to follow Durkheim, are we better advised to trace these indubitable feelings to the even more indubitable fact of our absolute dependence upon society? Part II of the present volume seeks to lay out some of the more influential accounts of the real nature of so-called religious experiences. In Part III, the concern lies with the way religion is shaped in and by the realities of diversity – diversity of race or sex/gender, or the differentials of global power. Are there such things as Black theories of religion, or female ones? Does one’s race, sex, or relation to the centers of world power change how one would, or should, theorize?

One final suggestion for students as they read through the book. Be alert to three steps I tried to follow as I wrote each chapter. First, each chapter tends to be organized about a basic *problem of*

religion emergent at a particular time because of various changes that occur in a society. Such a change might be the discovery of heretofore unknown prehistoric societies of Europe, and the way they put into question the Bible’s version of the human past. This, in turn, put into question the account of the world and humanity given in the sacred scripture of the West, and thus of the religious life led in accord with its guidance. Or such a change might be the “discovery” of the Freudian unconscious and the revision this has caused in many quarters of our sense of our own ability to know ourselves – and especially to know if we can trust our religious experiences.

Second, once these shocks to the religious self-consciousness are felt, what reactions by way of new *theories* of religion emerged? What, for example, did Robertson Smith have to say about modern Christianity, with its strong emphasis on *belief* in God, once what he took to be the earliest levels of biblical religion seemed totally devoid of beliefs as such? What was Freud to make of the prevalence of modern Christian religious experience of absolute dependence upon God the Father, when to him it seemed as if this might be based on childhood memories of the power of our own human fathers?

Third, and finally, no matter whether we find that thinkers like Robertson Smith or Freud were wrong or not about their conclusions about religion, the job of understanding these (and all the other) theories is only complete when we have satisfied ourselves that we understand *why the theorists thought that they were right!* How and why, for example, could anyone, like Robertson Smith, to take a case in point, think that there could even be people, much less religious people, who lacked beliefs? Whatever else students take from this book, I hope they will at least feel that they understand how and why some remarkable folk tried to *understand and explain religion*. And that, incidentally, is why I titled this book *Understanding Theories of Religion*.

References

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