
Introduction

Is There Room for Theory in Religious Studies?

Philip L. Tite

...what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme*, in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility. (Michel Foucault 1994, xxii)

For a proposition to be verifiable, it is not enough that it should be true, but it must also be such as we can *discover* to be true. Thus verifiability depends upon our capacity for acquiring knowledge, and not only upon the objective truth. (Bertrand Russell 1914, 116).

“**N**ausated”—That was how I felt last year at one point while teaching a course on peace and violence issues in New Testament ethics. The definitional question, as in other courses in the humanities and social sciences, was a continual focus for my students: What *is* “peace”? What *is* “violence”? These questions gave way to the query, “Can’t we just move beyond the definitional question and get down to studying peace and violence in the New Testament?” The person raising such a query in the back of his mind was none other than myself. Still, engaging those frameworks that tacitly underlie scholarly work is perhaps the most significant aspect of developing

critical, explanatory tools, not only within the classroom, but, perhaps even more so, in the jungles of academia.

I have heard similar groans when the topic of method and theory is raised. “All you do is *talk* theory, you never *do* theory,” is a common rhetorical, knee jerk reaction to theorists in the field. Implicit is the belief that *real* scholars, doing *real* scholarship, study *real* religions. Intimately inscribed in such reactions is the necessity to determine what “real” stands for, and what we mean by “religions”—indeed, can we do such “real” scholarship without method and theory? With such an aversion to theoretical issues, is there room for theorizing in the academic study of religion? Over the past few decades a rising chorus of voices has emerged to counter such denigrating attitudes toward theorizing. Within the International Association for the History of Religion, and especially the North American Association for the Study of Religion, as well as in some corners of the American Academy of Religion these voices have called for the central importance for developing open dialogues over matters of theory. The international journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, along with some other major international journals (e.g., *Religion* and *Culture and Religion*, and the online *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*), has created such discursive spaces for exploring and debating theorization in the academic study of religion. (We could also mention such monograph series as the “Issues in the Study of Religion” series, edited by Bryan Rennie and published through SUNY Press.) Despite the emergence of such an appreciation for theoretical aspects of our field, there are still few places that specifically focus on theory. The tendency has been to treat theory as an “add on” topic to more serious religious studies work, resulting in the need for new discursive spaces for theoretical articulation.

During my tenure as editor of *ARC*, I have attempted to generate just such a space within the journal’s pages. Over the past four years we have initiated the *Discipline in Dialogue* section and encouraged more theoretical pieces to be submitted along with the more traditional “area studies” articles. Pedagogical reflection has also been something we have attempted to encourage, partly due to my conviction that theory and pedagogy—critical, explanatory analysis and class-

room engagement—are intimately interlinked. It is my hope that future volumes of this journal will continue to attract and foster a discursive forum for not only analysing religious traditions, but also analysing the very study of religious traditions.

This year's volume of *ARC* includes a healthy dose of theorization in religious studies. The volume begins with four articles that engage one of the most influential thinkers of the late twentieth century, Jacques Derrida. As one of the leading Derrida scholars, John Caputo was invited to a special conference held at McGill University in 2001. Along with Professor Caputo's insightful analysis of Derrida's theoretical work, the conference also included response lectures by Philip Buckley, the chair of the Department of Philosophy at McGill, as well as Maurice Boutin, who, as a seasoned scholar in philosophy of religion, has been an active researcher and brilliant teacher here in the Faculty of Religious Studies. Whereas Buckley directly engages Caputo's work, Boutin strikes out into new directions by placing the topic within a broader framework of Western philosophical (or theological) discussions of religion and hermeneutics. All three of these talks, slightly modified for publication, are included in this year's volume under the topic "Theorizing Through Derrida." A fourth contribution to this thematic section, which was not part of the conference on "Texts and Truths" but nonetheless is a welcomed addition to this section, is Nathan Kerr's engaging application of Derrida's theories on "naming"/alterity to theological issues, specifically the nature of the name "Jesus" within Christian conceptions of deity. All four of these articles explicate at some length the theoretical value of Derridian thought, in some cases challenging Derrida's thought directly and at points challenging scholarly understandings of Derrida.

Among our non-thematic articles, we begin with Robert Morrison's special lecture on humour in the writings about, or relating the teachings of, the Buddha. This article was originally delivered by Professor Morrison while he was in Montreal as the Numata Chair two years ago. The Numata Chair is a highly prestigious post designed to bring outstanding scholars in Eastern traditions into the Faculty of Religious Studies as a visiting professor during the Fall term. It is required of the post holder to deliver a special lecture to the Faculty. This particu-

lar address by Morrison was an outstanding and provocative combination of close engagement with primary literature and a fresh interpretative perspective on the irony and satire in that literature. What emerges is a new, cutting edge re-presentation of the Buddha and his interlocutors.

Following Morrison's piece, Thomas Oord offers a careful and articulate study of points of connection between Process thinkers and Evangelical theologians. Not only does Oord effectively present the debate, both the differences and overlaps, of these two streams of thought, he also offers a case for the compatibility of these two movements. Oord, emerging from a Wesleyan tradition, is himself an active participant in the debate he presents.

The last two non-thematic articles were inspired by our "Women in Religion and Religious Studies" special section from last year. Lisa Bernal offers a helpful and timely look at the role of women preachers in the history of Christianity, arguing that the concept of "deviancy" has been, and continues to be, a vital component in the strategy of many women in Christianity to establish an authoritative space for themselves. Rebecca Goldman, who has been working on the role of women in Islamic traditions, reassesses a hotly contested subject both within scholarly and popular circles: the role of the veil. Goldman looks at various issues and problems in feminist assessments of women in Islam, and then offers a case-by-case survey, with a primary focus on veiling practices, of diverse "feminisms" within various Islamic countries.

Following our regular articles, we return to issues of method and theory in the *Discipline in Dialogue* section. Stefan Rossbach highlights one of the most important European theorists in social theory circles, namely Niklas Luhmann. I recall a comment by one of our anonymous referees, a comment I think nicely summarizes the value of Rossbach's study: "it is essential that this article be published." Essential, that is, due to both the under-appreciation and misunderstanding of Luhmann's work in English-speaking circles (typically overshadowed by, or only encountered through, the work of Habermas), as well as the meticulous care that Rossbach takes in explicating Luhmann's thought. The second article in this section engages more histo-

riographical issues. Mayyada Kheir, who is leaving McGill to continue her research in Paris, has studied the French Revolution in intricate detail and with a passion and care that typifies a true historian. In this article, she offers a careful survey of (scholarly) readings of Henri Grégoire and his role in the Revolution, exploring not only Grégoire's thought but also, perhaps more so, the cultural appropriation and identity construction of, or through, this enigmatic figure.

Most of these articles, and many of the reviews in our book review section, directly or indirectly engage issues of theory and method. What theoretical tools or models exist for religious studies? What is the applicability of such models for various arenas of discourse (theology, feminism, historiography, etc)? What we are offered in this year's volume is a solid collection of articles, by an insightful, engaging, and diverse group of scholars, that will hopefully evoke further reflection, critical engagement and (an editor's longing wish) written articles that push the various discussions even further.

Over the past four years that I've served as the editor of this journal a healthy new direction has emerged, one that this current volume of the journal nicely indicates. As this will be my final year as the senior editor of *ARC*, handing the reigns of glory over to my able successor Warren Kappeler, and given the thematic emphasis that I have attempted to foster and hope others (editors and authors) will continue to foster, I would like to take the opportunity to express my own views on the necessity of method and theory within the academic study of religion. In a sense, I would like to present a type of prolegomena for the journal to become a leading voice in the field in highlighting the vital role that method and theory plays within the field of religious studies.

The word "theory" comes from the Greek *theōria*, which simply means "to view" or "to watch," including to "reflect" upon. For intellectual purposes, theory tends to be used in very broad applications, denoting interpretative frameworks, cultural or epistemological paradigms or discourses. An apt analogy, drawn from Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, is an operating table where everything is laid out, delimited, and organized for cataloguing and critical examination. When theory is seen in such broad terms, the term ceases to serve any

functional value. Indeed, all becomes theory and therefore theory becomes all things. An impasse occurs and we return to our nauseated attitude, concluding that all talk of theory is simply to babble away in endless circles of meaninglessness and, at the very worst, narcissistic scholarly self-reflection. If this were what I meant by theory, then I would surely agree, indeed I would advocate the “death of theory” and warn my students against the futility, indeed parasitical danger of theorizing! Thankfully, “theory” need not be meaningless.

Indeed, I would see theory as essentially denoting “meaningfulness.” Specifically, I see theory as a three-fold process of describing, explaining, and critiquing social and cultural processes of meaningfulness. These three aspects of theory (description, explanation, critique) are functional steps for “reflecting” or “viewing” in a scholarly fashion what it means to have meaning—meaning for whom, under what conditions, with what socio-rhetorical implications. These three steps have been argued for as central to the academic study of religion by Russell McCutcheon, most recently in his collection of essays *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (2001), and is based on such major theorists as Bruce Lincoln (e.g., 1994; 1989) and Jonathan Z. Smith (e.g., 2000; 1996; 1978), along with a strong dose of E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (e.g., 1990), Donald Wiebe (e.g., 1984a; 1984b), Robert Segal (e.g., 2000; 1983), and Burton Mack (e.g., 1996; 1989).

At the first level of description, theory works with the initial construction of data. We look around us, talk to those we are studying, catalogue and define what we are going to analyse. Such an approach is somewhat similar to a phenomenological process, and indeed phenomenological approaches form one theoretical framework, though surely not the only one. (For a useful overview and discussion of both phenomenology of religion and philosophical phenomenology, see Sharma 2001.) Insider viewpoint plays an important role at this stage, placing a focus on verifiability of the specific units of data we are collecting. Data, of course, is constructed, and such construction is clearly driven by our analytical concerns, and thereby shaped by our analytical frameworks. In other words, the data itself is distanced from the “reality” to which it is indicative by the very process of criti-

cally delimiting what we, as scholars, are looking at (i.e. our epistemological framework, our analytical questions, and our random and not-so-random selectivity for deciding what will and will not constitute “data”). What has been referred to as “middle range theory” in the social sciences and archaeological research, is not all that different from this process of collecting, defining, and describing (indeed, even naming) our data. Such descriptive processes can be broken down into various stages of complexity—e.g., noting a bone fragment, a type of metal work in a tool, and an inscription at a burial site all can be assimilated together within the context of describing a social or ideological family structure. Taking several such homesteads in an area into consideration, we are able to further describe, e.g., a feudal system. The same is, I believe, true of describing those social-ideological bodies we tend to label “religions”: we take a little of this (a burial inscription), a little of that (a narrative text), some of the other (a letter), and more of this (a bowl used in a sacramental ritual) and we make a general description of what constituted a given “religion” at a given time in a given locality. This process of establishing data at various levels of descriptive complexity I would like to simply call multi-descriptive work. This process of creating data that is, in some way, reflective of what the data is pointing towards or describing (wherein the insider perspective serves an important role), is a common sense truism in any historical or archaeological analysis that it almost seems silly to even point it out. A problem, however, emerges when the descriptive is either lost within a purely subjective appreciation for epistemological construction (all “meaning” thereby lies only within the perspective of the scholar as situated) or when the descriptive work is seen as the end of the scholarly process of creating knowledge.

The second level of critical theorizing, explanation, moves beyond the descriptive re-telling and cataloguing process of the first level and offers what Russell McCutcheon has called a “redescriptive” presentation of the data. This stage of explanatory redescription shifts the focus away from understanding the insider’s world and, instead, attempts to explain that world within theoretical considerations raised by the scholar. In my own work, I’ve referred to this stage as “relative relations.” Relative relations refers less to the data being compared,

and instead to the analytical questions that frame the scholar's comparative work. By asking what "mode of relation" exists between data—such as economic, psychological, ethical, or sociological relations—we as scholars are able to use the data within an explanatory (indeed, epistemological) framework. Unlike 19th century ontological reduction, which "explained away" religious truth claims (collapsing relations with data), relative relations fits better what is referred to as methodological reduction, i.e., the delimitation of data for the sake an analysis. The relativity of the relation (a specific "framing" or delimiting is only valid for the sake of a particular analytical question or project, while the same data will be delimited or "framed" differently within another analytical context) allows a clear distinction between the described data (and the reality to which it points) and the explanatory theorization of that data, including classification systems. Another advantage of this redescriptive relativism is that the second level of theory shifts the focus from *insider* perspective to *outsider* analytical questions. By analogy, we are translating insider claims in order to answer outsider questions, with "understanding" (first level description) serving as a basis for "explanation" (second level redescription). To return to Foucault's analogy, we are taking the "pieces" of description and arranging or juxtaposing them on the theorizing operating table of *our* discourse for *our* analytical purposes. We may arrange and valuate our data differently on our operating table when we raise new analytical questions, or address new research problems.

There is, however, a third level in theorizing that is absolutely essential for the scholarly community: critique. An enormous expenditure of our time as scholars is spent in self-reflectivity. We organize conferences, publish books and articles, commence dissertations (the opening "method chapter"), and indeed keep the market-driven economy of academia alive by looking at each other and evaluating the pros and cons of our analytical frameworks and the products that those theory-building tools create. Scholarship is, in many ways narcissistically, our own "better business bureau." I once said to a colleague, while in the periodical section of a research library, "Do you see all these journals? This is proof that academics is driven by non-consensus; consensus would be the death of academics." My some-

what exaggerated comment carries a grain of truth, and that grain need not run against the grain of our attempts to actually make some sense of the world around us. Critique is an important process of calling into question biases, unseen implications, and gaps within scholarly products. It also allows us to continue producing new theoretical tools in order to continue addressing emerging problems. Thomas Kuhn's now classic *Structures of Scientific Revolutions* is essentially built on such an understanding of a sociology of knowledge; and, despite its now datedness and the challenges that it has faced, it is still a valuable lesson for recognizing the problem-solving-theory-building spiralling process of any academic study, including an academic study of religion. This entire process of description-explanation-critique is functionally focused towards the construction of "knowable knowledge" rather than self-evident or absolute truth knowledge. (For a fuller discussion of the preceding view on theory, see Tite Forthcoming; 2003; 2001)

What does all this have to do with religion? And, furthermore, what does this have to do with a religious studies journal? If religious studies explores those social authorizing and normative processes that invoke mythical, sacred, mysterious, and transcendent conceptions, then it is necessary to look at those conceptions as social authorizing and normative processes (cf. Eagleton 1991). In order to accomplish such analytical agendas, to move from understanding insider beliefs to explaining such beliefs for delimited outsider problem-solving questions, theory is absolutely essential. Indeed, theory is unavoidable. Without a process of theorization, there is no operating table on which to utilize our methods of study. And just like an operating table where we need a delimited focus in order to function, so also with theorizing religion. Without theory, our playing with methods on "religion/religions" results not in the construction of knowable knowledge, but rather a big, yucky mess that some future generation of scholars will have to clean up.

Theory matters. And, perhaps, more important than theory is the ability and willingness of scholars to dialogue about theory. My own understanding of theorization, which is strongly influenced by such reductionists as Lincoln, McCutcheon, J. Z. Smith, and Segal, is surely

not the only way that those in field will conceive of theorizing. We will disagree, debate, and (hopefully!) learn from each other. But at least we will be discussing theory! Taking it seriously. Viewing it as necessary and beneficial frameworks within which to work, rather than as an obstruction or necessary evil in “doing real religious studies.” It is in the generating of discursive space that such a question “Is there room for theory in religious studies” becomes relevant for a scholarly journal to address. Publishing is one of several venues within which we (re-)construct, (re-)produce, and (re-)form the academic study of religion. The classroom, the conference setting, and public channels of discussion (such as public lectures, the media, or serving on government advisory committees or as expert witnesses in courts) are all important sites for creating and maintaining an academic self-understanding or identity. Publishing, however, is a classic venue for such dialogue, especially *between* scholars. Journals, such as *ARC*, allow such dialogues to emerge, or establish the boundaries of such discussions. As the senior editor of this journal, it is, in part, my job to determine what “fits” the journal and what doesn’t. Such limiting processes, grounded in a particular sense of identity of the journal and of the field that it serves, affects submission and solicitation decisions. Those decisions (“this is not a scholarly work,” “this would fit better with a theological, confessional journal,” “this is an outstanding contribution that needs to be published,” etc.), when taken with similar decisions made by other editors and publishers, play an important role in shaping or defining the field.

Therefore, the question “Is there room for theory in religious studies” is a vital one for any editor of a religious studies journal. It is a question that I raised four years ago when I first joined *ARC*’s editorial board. Given my conviction that theory is a vital part of any scholarly endeavour, and that there is a need for theoretical works alongside traditional (and some non-traditional) area study works, I have tried to foster such a space within the pages of *ARC*. As a general religious studies journal that is openly interdisciplinary in what it publishes, our openness to theory pieces is not limited to simply one school of thought or understanding of “theory”—indeed, we have published several articles by those scholars who hold reductionist positions

(Wiebe, McCutcheon, Braun) and those who hold irreductionist positions (Sharma, Rennie) as well as those who seem to fall outside the dichotomy of reductionism/irreductionism (such as this year's special section on Derrida, or Rossbach's engagement with systems theory, or the various, and diverse, articles on feminist theory). I firmly believe that maintaining a space for multiple, and even conflicting, voices is a necessary and healthy part of academics. As I leave the editorship of this journal in the capable hands of my successor, Warren, it is my hope that he and others on the editorial board will strive to continue fostering such a space within the journal. For indeed, whether we are in the classroom or a convention centre, sharing our views through the spoken/unspoken word or the published/unpublished text, our work will only be productive when we look past our "nausea" and affirmatively embrace the potential of engaging the place of theory in religious studies.

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