



## Science Envy in Theories of Religion

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### Abstract

Recent theorizing about religion has largely shifted from the cultural to the biological domain. This, however, comes with a cost. To explore this in greater detail, the present essay is divided into three parts: first, I seek to reclaim and redefine what usually passes for the “phenomenology” of religion in the writings traditionally associated with likes of Gerardus van der Leeuw, often by way of Mircea Eliade. I seek to take an initial, tentative step in this reclamation by returning to an admittedly idiosyncratic reading of one version of Heidegger’s philosophy that emerges from the pages of his *Sein und Zeit*. Second, to show how this new theorizing, rather than contribute to the dubious and quasi-theological discourses associated with the philosophy of religion, enables us to focus with renewed energy upon the constant process of self- and group making. In the third section, I try to nudge (with the aim of perhaps dislodging) what could well become the new regnant discourse of current theorizing about religion.

### Keywords

phenomenology, cultural studies, identity, science, Martin Heidegger, social construction

### Introduction

In the recently published *Contemporary Theories of Religion* (Stausberg 2009; hereafter *CTR*), at least 9 of the 15 chapters are devoted to theories that interpret and/or explain religion from perspectives that can loosely be labeled as “cognitivist,” “evolutionary” or “neuropsychological.” Even one of the most “religious studies” theories found therein, namely, Thomas Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling*, spends a certain amount of time discussing the cognitive and scientific bases of religion. While the volume as a whole is to be celebrated for showcasing recent trends in thinking about the origins and persistence of religion, read on another level it gives the impression that such thinking has largely

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migrated out of the humanities into the natural and behavioral sciences, even if such theorizing is still largely carried out in Religious Studies departments. This shift from the cultural to the biological, I fear, comes with a cost. If we ignore the social and ideological formation of “religious” forms, we risk misunderstanding how these forms contribute to matters of identity and difference.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the more scientific approaches devoted to theorizing religion found in *CTR* work on the assumption that religion is informed by cognitive processes that are not conscious—such as types of categorizations (Boyer), counter-intuitiveness (Pyysiäinen), and anthropomorphism (Guthrie). While I certainly agree that it is necessary to appreciate these unconscious processes, I prefer to mark them primarily as cultural as opposed to biological. Rather than assume that we are somehow “hard-wired” for religion, I present the following as a reminder that we not lose sight of the innate (but not necessarily biological) propensity to define ourselves in the light of changing and unruly social worlds. I am well aware of the potential paradox of using the term “innate” here in ways that, in Darwinian circles at least, would seem to indicate that would seem to indicate an evolutionary model. I certainly do not intend to come across as holding a creationist or anti-evolutionary viewpoint. My goal, however, is to focus on the cultural, ideological, and literary reasons that contribute to self- and other-making. So while the need of creating identities (normative or otherwise) might well have biological roots (in which case I will leave it to others to figure this out), my goal is to look at some of the other “non-biological” features that constellate around or emerge from this need.

Rather than be interested solely in cognitive processes—in whether religion is “real” or not, or whether we are somehow biologically conditioned for it—it is important not to jettison further exploration into religion as a socio-cultural formation. By “socio-cultural formation,” invoking Althusser, I refer to a complex of concrete economic, political, and ideological relations, bound together and given a particular character by various historical actors (e.g., 2001 [1970]: 122-124). My interest, accordingly, is not with whether or not religion (or religions) exists, but with how they are imagined to exist and, even more importantly, the manifold and complex ways they are appealed to in the quest for social meaning. By “imagination” I am less interested in the psychological or the neuro-psychological basis of religion than in how religion is perceived to carry *social* markers of identity formations.

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<sup>1</sup> So as not to bog down the narrative, even if quotation marks are not literally around the term “religion” they should be imagined to be. In this regard, as will become evident, I contend that “religion” and “religious” are fairly useless analytical categories. But, unfortunately and conventionally, use them we must.

In the Introduction to *CTR*, Stausberg argues that theories of religion must take into consideration four overlapping questions (2009: 3-6): (1) specificity (i.e., what is unique about religion); (2) origins (i.e., conditions that witness the emergence/origination of religion); (3) functions (i.e., what religion is perceived to do); and (4) structure (e.g., coherence). My musings here are less interested in creating a theory of religion than in thinking about religion and the invention of cultural identity at particular historical moments (see, for example, Hughes, forthcoming). Yet, if I must address these questions, let me state (albeit hesitantly) that: (1) the specificity of religion is its evocation of transcendence *for believers* (not theoreticians); (2) that it is invoked and/or appealed to in the invention of cultural identity; (3) that its main function is self- and group-making; and (4) that its structure is, paradoxically, its lack of structure, namely, that “religion”’s porosity and instability permits manifold and contradictory appeals across time and geography.

All of these four points pivot around a few key terms: identity, discourse, and invention. By “identity,” I refer to the rather complex set of processes that permit individuals and groups to identify (whether by themselves or by others) as part of a discrete and identifiable *cultural* group. Appeals to various lexemes, terms, and tropes (i.e., the “discourse”) function to maintain group solidarity, drawing further parameters between *perceived* selves and *perceived* others. These borders, because they are so firmly invested in identity-making (e.g., Muslimness, Jewishness), are not natural markers but cultural inventions. Moreover, they are borders that are never static but ones that change through time and often in counterpoint with related markers of identity (e.g., class, gender, race).

This “theory” of religion has several advantages. First, it puts primacy on the *why* of religion as opposed to the *how*. Secondly, it makes no distinction between dimensions or modalities of ambiguous signifiers such as “religious” or “sacred” and other *identifiable and analyzable* social forms. Thirdly, it enables us to account for the cultural, historical, and sociological record. Less interested in the inherited or inherent mechanisms that make people religious, I prefer to examine why people/groups at certain historical periods—at least based on the textual records that they have bequeathed to us—imagine themselves and invoke certain lexemes that we today interpret as “religious.” Many of the “scientific” theories play down precisely these historical and textual records and instead prefer to make context-less pronouncements, potentially ignoring both how culture matters to both biology and informs/contextualizes biological (and other) scientific theorizing. Fourthly, and relatedly, this theory accounts for change. Rather than assume, for example, that terms such as “Islam” are stable, I contend that they are constantly

imagined and re-imagined, invented and re-invented as opposed to being vectored or recuperated. Fifthly, many of the current trends highlighted in *CTR* mark or signify “religion” as an epiphenomenon of cognitive and biological functions. Yet, rather than assume that religion exists naturally, whether in the brain or in the world, it is important not to lose sight of the manifold ways it is appealed to in the construction, formation, and subsequent invocation of diverse and unstable identities. Before considering adopting the timeframes demanded by sciences such as evolutionary biology or the timeswerves of the likes of neuropsychology, I suggest that we not forget the cultural, historical, and political spaces wherein people construct themselves—rightly or wrongly, for better or worse—as religious.

In many ways, I am calling for replacing one sort of reductionism (biological, cognitive) with another (issues of identity). The latter sort, it seems to me, enables us to factor in its *perceived* ubiquity rather than isolate “religion” as an independent variable. Because I largely refuse to take religion seriously as a category, my form of reductionism hopefully accounts for “religion” as it is folded into, and indeed non-existent apart from, other historical, social, economical, and political forces.

While certainly not wanting to curtail theorizing about religion from cognitive theorists, evolutionary biologists, and the like, my goal is to encourage other humanists (e.g., scholars of religion, cultural theorists, those engaged in gender and postcolonial studies) to think about how religion contributes to the invention of cultural identities, concomitant notions of identity, and how these “distinctions” subsequently become reinscribed in daily life. What follows is divided into three parts: first, I seek to reclaim and redefine what usually passes for the “phenomenology” of religion in the writings traditionally associated with likes of Gerardus van der Leeuw, often by way of Mircea Eliade. I seek to take an initial, tentative step in this reclamation by returning to an admittedly idiosyncratic reading of one version of Heidegger’s philosophy that emerges from the pages of his *Sein und Zeit*. Second, to show how this new theorizing, rather than contribute to the dubious and quasi-theological discourses associated with the philosophy of religion, enables us to focus with renewed energy upon the constant process of self- and group making. In the third section, I try to nudge (with the aim of perhaps dislodging) what could well become the new regnant discourse of current theorizing about religion.

## I. Toward a Much-Needed “Redefinition” of Phenomenology in Religious Studies

It is unfortunate that scholars of religion have largely misunderstood Phenomenology,<sup>2</sup> one of the most important strains of twentieth century philosophy. Primarily concerned with systematic reflection on the structures of consciousness and the phenomena that appear in acts of consciousness, Phenomenology seeks to focus and describe that which shows itself to us, noticing both how it displays itself and relates to the contexts in which such displays occur (Polt 1999: 14).<sup>3</sup>

Phenomenology, as developed by the likes of Edmund Husserl, is mistrustful of any attempt by the natural sciences to solve human problems. In his “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” (1965 [1910]), for example, Husserl dismisses the claims that science can provide solid epistemological ground because the problems and riddles inherent to its first principles ultimately succeed in putting solutions outside of its grasp. For Husserl, phenomenological analysis can proceed only if we separate the matter in question from the qualifications imposed on it by either the theoretical framework of science or the existential “positings” of the investigator. In other words, we must return to the matters in question, as they are themselves; and the procedure whereby this is accomplished is Phenomenology, specifically, by means of reduction. This involves, *inter alia*, looking at objects of analysis by examining how we, in our many ways of being, actually “constitute” such objects.

My main concern in the brief space allotted to me here, however, is not so much with Husserl, but with certain aspects of the hermeneutical and phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger (at least the one of *Sein und Zeit* as opposed to the later Heidegger). For the latter, the history of western thinking has created a stark dichotomy between appearance and reality, or

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<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, important to realize that Phenomenology is not a monolith and that it represents a continuous tradition and is still defended and debated. My account of the tradition here, as mentioned, is based on one reading of one version of Heidegger’s philosophy rather than representing phenomenology as such.

<sup>3</sup> This is, in many ways, a far cry from the way that terms such as “phenomena” or “manifestation” are employed within religious studies. To quote from Thomas Ryba,

The categorical meaning of manifestation inherited by today’s religious studies is one so ambiguous as to be useless. The works of Rudolph Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade have led to its indiscriminate application to any religious phenomenon (168).

While I am even critical of the term “manifestation” (i.e., manifestation of what?), it is nevertheless necessary to understand how this has traditionally been employed within religious studies, if for no other reason than to see its burial as a critical term or concept.

framed in another way, between the way things show themselves and the way they really are. Rather than further perpetuate such dichotomies, Heidegger contends that phenomena are not mere appearances or superficial illusions (of, for example, some transcendent signifier or *logos*), but genuine self-displays (Heidegger 2000 [1962]: 58). Despite this, however, he warns that we inevitably and ultimately run up against the problems of illusion, of concealment and of the superficiality associated with the status quo and its claims to explain or interpret the “obvious.” Accordingly, for Heidegger, phenomenology must return always and anew to that which we claim to have knowledge of and about, thereby engaging in the constant interpretation of phenomena in addition to the very act of interpretation itself.

Phenomenology of the Heideggerian bent must undergo continual interpretation as we further revise and elaborate upon the contextual structures in which phenomena display themselves. There exists no point at which we can safely say that interpretation is over and that we understand something finally or definitively (something that occurs all too frequently in religious studies circles, especially among so-called “phenomenologists” of religion). Appeals to metaphysics, to essences, to the experiential, to the technology of science lead to the false gods of certainty and inevitability, and thus to intellectual stagnation. To make claims that we have understood “religion,” mapped its location in the brain or in the world, is not to take away the wonder of religion (as the theologian might well opine). Such claims do, however, provide a sense of certainty or security where there is none; a notion of simplicity where there is in fact much messiness.

Phenomenology represents an acknowledgment that understanding, like everything, takes place in time. There is accordingly no such thing as being outside of the structures of temporality, nothing to which we can make metaphysical appeals. The temporality of time, the very thrownness of human existence, accordingly make it such that we must guard against mistaking constructs for essences. Although Heidegger’s main concern is with the unconcealment of Being, it is—like everything—inconceivable without language and that the ontological categories associated with Being become encased in and inseparable from the texture of larger social, cultural and political contexts.

Neither time nor space permits me to provide an in-depth analysis of the use of phenomenology in the study of religion. However, let me adumbrate its use by two scholars, one who eschewed the term and one who embraced it. As for the former, let me briefly examine Mircea Eliade who, for better or worse, exerted a tremendous influence on the discipline (sub-discipline?) misleadingly entitled “Phenomenology of Religion.” For Eliade, a manifestation

“embodies and reveals” something other than itself and thereby becomes sacralized (Eliade 1958: 13). This process of sacralization, what Eliade calls an “hierophany,” produces in the phenomena in which the “sacred” is revealed—or in which it shows itself—leads to the “coexistence of contradictory essences: sacred and profane, spirit and matter, eternal and non-eternal, and so on” (29).

Because of all his talk of “essences” and the “irreducibility” of the “sacred,” Eliade is largely uninterested in historical time, in historicity, or in critiquing the traditional logocentrism that privileges logos over phenomena. This all too often results in the sympathetic attempt to participate in the experience of *homo religiosus* (Allen 1972: 170); distinctions between artificial binaries of “the sacred” and “the profane”; and employing an inductive method to discern cross-cultural patterns.

Ninian Smart—unlike Eliade, a self-confessed “phenomenologist”—attempted to move from the domain of “religion” to “religions” as they exist “on the ground.” In so doing, Smart argued (and I think much more successfully than Eliade), that all religions consist of seven dimensions (viz., ritual, myths, experience, institutions, ethics, doctrines, and material [Smart 1999]). These dimensions, according to him, account for the “interconnected regularities” (Strenski 2006: 192) of religions. Nevertheless, Smart’s phenomenology still privileges religion (although now left indefinable) by his implicit use of a set of *sui generis* beliefs (Fitzgerald 2000: 72). Moreover, it seems to me that Smart is still caught in the implication of an amorphous sacred that exists transcendentally to its various phenomenological manifestations.

One of the unfortunate repercussions of the “phenomenology of religion” is that it has largely curtailed philosophical phenomenological analysis in religious studies. Phenomenology, as I now wish to frame it, is *not* interested in essences (à la Eliade) or in family resemblances or phenomenal dimensions of an ill-defined logos (à la Smart). Phenomenology is, according to its very root, the study of *phenomena*, of appearances, as opposed to transcendent realities, essences or even resemblances.

## II. Putting Phenomenology Into Practice

How, then, might we take these philosophical insights and apply them to theorizing about religion? Keeping in mind my answers to the aforementioned theoretical four questions posed by Stausberg, it is important to realize that religions, like all social formations, are actively produced temporally, in time, and in ways that are contingent upon social and ideological categories of

alterity; they most decidedly are not passively accepted as humans relate to some vague notion of eternity, an appearance that religions themselves create. For me, this is the problem with Smart's phenomenology: it still assumes a certain degree of reification. So-called religious vocabularies, including the taxonomies derived therefrom, draw their potency from self-legitimation, which subsequently facilitates integration into potentially unruly and anomic social worlds.

My interest, as mentioned above, is not with ascertaining historical origins, but with understanding religions as ongoing productions in situations of identity-negotiations. Ascertaining religious origins is as potentially problematic now as it was in previous generations. Whether to locate these origins in feelings of "awe" (as Otto wanted to) or "counter-intuitive representations" (as Pyysiäinen does) is too simplistic. Indeed by trying to locate the so-called *Urreligion*, many modern scientists succeed in reinscribing amorphous values to signifiers—some would say Western signifiers—such as "ritual" or "religion."

Structurally, rather than uphold reified borders between "religious" and "non-religious" (or "secular")—borders that are often constructed and projected retroactively (see Fitzgerald 2007: 1-15)—it is contingent upon us to examine their porosity or even indistinction with the so-called "political," "economic," "social," and the like. More specifically, the instability of religion, the way it constructs "natural" identity artificially, further reveals that terms and categories such as the "sacred," "god," even "time" itself, are not some substantial things out there. All that exists does so as phenomena—not essences, not manifestations—and that they must be understood contextually.

Rather than maintain that cultures are composed of sets of stable and closed representations, beliefs, and symbols, I prefer—under the watchful eye of a type of, for lack of a better term, cultural phenomenology—to interrogate the notion that there exists a stable and uniform identity that moves, unchanged, throughout history. It is here that I become mistrustful of the "cognitivist" and "neuropsychological" approaches to religion precisely because both seem to ignore the specifics of temporality and of the cultural spaces wherein individuals and groups cobble together narratives from pre-existent discourses with the aim of defining and legitimating their worldviews to themselves and to others. Religion should not be privileged in all of this as the internal synapses that transmit a set of neurological signals that give humans the propensity for spirituality. On the contrary, we need to envisage religions as a set of unstable, yet *culturally*-constructed, discourses that enable and facilitate the creation of (or, perhaps better, the imagining of) identities that always risk ambiguation and instability. They facilitate, to use the lan-



guage of Jean-François Bayart, an *imaginaire*, which, quoting Deleuze, he defines as "... not the unreal, but the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal" (Bayart 2005: 132). In his *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, Bayart writes

in a given society [this] *imaginaire* does not represent a coherent totality, since it includes a host of heterogeneous, constantly changing figures. Imaginary productions are thus not necessarily isomorphic. Moreover, as symbolic productions by definition they have many meanings and are ambivalent. It is in this respect that they help "hold together" a society without this "holding together of its world of meaning" ever being demonstrated or even assumed to be demonstrable (2005: 233).

Rather than envisage the existence of a permanent inner core peculiar to each culture that confers upon it a veridical nature that determines present and future, cultural theorists prefer to stress the process of the subsequent elaboration of an ideology that speaks of the present by imagining an ideal past. Such a process enables those in the present to tame unruliness where meanings are often fraught with ambiguity and where identities are anything but stable (See the comments in McCutcheon 2005: 42-46).

### III. Back to the Future

My greatest concern when it comes to theorizing about religion comes from two fronts: the first is that the *sui generis* status quo will prevail; and the second is that such theorizing will largely migrate out of the humanities and into the various scientific disciplines. Enough has been written that critiques the former (e.g., McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000; Hughes 2009), and it remains to see whether such critiques will successfully challenge the liberal Protestant and ecumenical vision that currently reigns supreme in humanities-based theorizing on and about religion. My concern here, however, is with the latter. Treatments of "religion" that seek to define it in terms of "meme theory" (i.e., a system of replicators that infect religious minds), of cognitive theory (i.e., as a form of biological endowment), or of evolutionary biology (i.e., as something that has evolved to promote and secure traits for solidarity) do not necessarily aid us in understanding the complexity of religion and how it is invested in or, perhaps better, how we invest it in the processes associated with self- and group-making.

Rarely do scientific theories of "religion" interrogate it as a cultural form. Until science progresses, we have little evidence that we are any more predisposed to religion than we are to economic or political systems. Religions, *qua*

discourses that invoke transcendence, provide the tropes or the shards (or whatever we want to call them) that help facilitate the scattered, irregular, and often damaged hydra of identity, both collective or individual. Because “scientific” approaches to theorizing about religion largely tend to ignore this hydra, or because they tend to oversimplify it, they leave much to be desired. What, for example, do we do with texts that are traditionally constructed as religious? What do we do with the manifold and complicated intersections between religion and ethnicity? Religion and ideology? Religion and the construction and rival claims of authority? Or, do we do what we have traditionally done and say that these are only subsequent developments, ones that can never sully the “inner” and “spiritual” nature of religion?

Perhaps I unfairly characterize some of these recent trends in theorizing religion as replicating the type of privileging and reification found in traditional *sui generis* discourses. Yet, rather than legitimate this type of theorizing, including all of the basic scientific problems (problems elucidated by Husserl), I would prefer to encourage a sea change in religious studies that focuses on the construction, maintenance, and transgressions of boundaries between religious (or, perhaps better, ethnic) and other collective identities.

#### IV. Conclusions

“Scientific” attempts to uncover religious origins are done, as far as I can tell, for one of two reasons. Such theorizing is either an attempt to *understand* why people are still religious today (i.e., to account for the staying power of religion); or to *explain* religion with the aim of explaining it away. Neither of these reasons, however, suffice when it comes to understanding our temporal thrownness, our desire to make meaning in the light of darkness (although this may well be a religious metaphor, I certainly do not intend it as such), and our manifold appeals to constructed entities such as ethnicity, social groups and, especially, religion.

My goal here has been that we must if not actually resist the “scientific” theorizing of religion, then at least temper it if we are to understand something of the complex and constructed nature of all identities. Certainly some of this theorizing may well prove useful when it comes to articulating identity. However, I am yet to be convinced. Let me conclude, by arguing for the continued interrogation of phenomena, temporality, and construction—and how all are invested in the imagining and maintaining identity. It is in this respect that I introduced the thought of Heidegger as a potential catalyst to renew such theorizing. Moving beyond the “phenomenology” of the likes of

Eliade or even Smart, a renewed interest in philosophical phenomenology, with some modern and more cultural studies twists, might well reinvigorate theorizing about religion in the humanities.

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