JAN-OLAV HENRIKSEN

Religion as Orientation and Transformation

Religion in Philosophy and Theology
90

Mohr Siebeck

Religion in Philosophy and Theology

90

Jan-Olav Henriksen

Religion as Orientation and Transformation

A Maximalist Theory

Mohr Siebeck

Jan-Olav Henriksen, born 1961; 1990 Dr. theol.; 2000 Alan Richardson Fellow at the University of Durham, UK; 2002 Dr. phil.; since 1994 professor of systematic theology at MF Norwegian School of Theology; currently also Dean of Research; member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, NJ.

e-ISBN PDF 978-3-16-155099-7
ISBN 978-3-16-155098-0
ISSN 1616-346X (Religion in Philosophy and Theology)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at *http://dnb.dnb.de*.

The book was printed by Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

For my doctoral students

Acknowledgements

Many people and some institutions deserve my thanks as work on this book comes to a close. First, I would like to thank Peter Francis and the staff at Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, Wales, for the opportunity to stay there during the writing of most of the first draft in the fall of 2015. The hospitality and friendliness of the people at Gladstone's was instrumental to its development and made the stay enjoyable and fruitful.

I also want to thank Celia Deane-Drummond, my former colleague at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, presently at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, for suggesting Gladstone's to me as a good place to live, read, and write.

MF Norwegian School of Theology, and President Vidar Haanes, allowed me a break amidst my tasks and duties as Dean of Research to actually do some research, for which I am most grateful.

My wife, Hilde Marie, joined me on the trip to Wales and generously accepted to live with a husband who 'lived in his book' during most of the period. The life we share is invaluable to all dimensions of my existence as both a scholar and a human being! Thanks!

Becky Artinian-Kaiser has, once again, done the work in order to improve my English. All flaws still remaining are nevertheless my own responsibility.

Some people have read and commented on different drafts of the following pages, and I have discussed and presented the ideas here in different settings. I am especially grateful for the critical and constructive comments offered from Dr. Asle Eikrem, who read the whole draft and offered many suggestions for clarifications and improvements.

Some of the material in this book builds on material I have presented earlier in books and articles. This material has been reworked in this book to fit the present argument. I provide references to these previous publications in the relevant sections.

Parts of this book have been presented to and discussed with former and present doctoral students. This book would not have been possible without their constant challenge to me to enter new territories and gain new perspectives on the things that matter in the study of and reflection on religion. I dedicate this book to my former and present (and future) students: for discussion, criticism, and perhaps for inspiration.

Hawarden, Wales and Oslo, Norway, 2015–2016. *Jan-Olav Henriksen*

Table of Contents

Introduction

A maximalist theory

Religions claim to tell us something about the human condition. This statement, however, is ambiguous; it can mean that religions have a message to convey about what it is to be human, where we come from, where we should direct our attention, how we should orient our desires, and so on. However, we can also understand this claim as saying something about the human in a different sense: the fact that there is religion at all probably also says something about the human condition. It is religion in this latter meaning that will occupy us in this book. In other words, this work is not an attempt to articulate or give reasons for a specific religious attitude towards human life; rather, it wants to say something about how religions generally work, or what they do, in human life. To understand religion in this way not only sheds light on the phenomena we call 'religions' and 'religious', but, by doing so, it may also shed light on the human condition.

That we can understand the relation between religion and the human condition from different perspectives suggests the connection between them is complex and multi-faceted. What we assume that religions do (from an external perspective) is not, of course, independent of how they present themselves as ritual, doctrine, community, etc., from their own (internal) point of view. However, at some distance, we also need to say something about what religions have in common, and *why* they have these elements in common. This approach requires an outsider perspective and some distance from the actual self-reporting material of religions, but it also requires awareness of how religions function in the wider context of human life and action. To establish a more encompassing and generic approach, more than internal, religious positions are required.

There are many theories about religion on the market. Some focus on content or substance, some on function. They have their origins in different scholarly and scientific disciplines. My background discipline is philosophy of religion, but this does not mean that I will disregard elements from other disciplines in this work. To the contrary, I will argue that the only feasible approach to doing philosophy of religion today is in ways informed by other disciplines. Therefore, I propose a shift from focusing merely on the abstract notion of 'religion' to focusing on empirically identifiable religions that are present at hand in the world we take part in and experience. Moreover, this

focus also means that we cannot separate an understanding of what religions do from the actual activities and minds we identify as religious. Consequently, an implication of the shift I am proposing here is that this work should be understood as a contribution to a philosophy of *religions*, rather than the philosophy of religion.

The basic claim here is that the most fruitful perspective on religions (including from the point of view of the philosophy of religion) is to see what they provide in terms of *resources for orientation and transformation in the different realms of human life*. The elements in this claim are not unprecedented in scholarly work,[1] but I want to point to the fact that we need to see these two elements *as connected and interacting, but not identical*. Some scholars focus only on religions' ability to orient,[2] but I will argue that this is an under-determination of what they do. From an external perspective, religions also aim at *transformation*, a point clearly echoed in how some scholars see them as focusing on 'salvation', however differently understood.[3]

Furthermore, the basic claim above means that I consider belief and doctrine to be secondary (but nevertheless necessary) and constitutively related to practices that orient and transform a religious mode of being in the world. Since the Reformation religion has primarily been understood as doctrine in Western societies, and I will touch upon some of the reasons for this in the course of the present study. This doctrine approach has had a significant influence on the philosophy of religion, leading to an emphasis on the analysis and justification of doctrinal arguments.[4] To see religion mainly as doctrine, though, is rather misleading, and, instead, I follow a more pragmatist approach to religion and religious discourse. This implies that an utterance of belief is something that cannot be properly regarded as anything but the visible tip of an iceberg of practices, rituals, habits, dress codes, aims,

[1] Most notably, there are some parallels, but also significant differences, between my proposal here and the one offered in Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). See below, 178–181.

[2] See especially Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen: Hermeneutische Religionsphilosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Series in Philosophical and Cultural Studies in Religion (Aurora: Davies Group, 1999); and Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). I deal more extensively with these contributions in below, in this and the next chapter.

[3] See, for example, Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[4] That is what Timothy Knepper calls religious 'reason-giving', a theme I will discuss in the next chapter.

desires, etc.[5] However, suggesting that practices of reasoning and the articulation of doctrine are somehow secondary to other practices that constitute their function and meaning does not mean we should render them unimportant. They are important, and especially so, in cultures where practices of religiously based orientation and transformation have to present reasons for what they do, compared to what is required of other knowledge-based practices. The secondary character of doctrine means we need to see doctrines and reasoning as relating to, and emerging out of, concrete practices that are not necessarily transparent to the actual practitioners. It primarily means that other practices come before reflective practices expressed in doctrine, a point I think we can argue is valid in relation to most religious traditions in the world.[6]

By problematizing doctrine as the main element in religion, we also are able to overcome part of the ethnocentrism some detect in religious studies and in the philosophy of religion. A good example of this biased approach is one I myself experienced when visiting Thailand and speaking with my guide about religion. I was concerned with questions like "What do you believe?" and themes related to possible secularization, whereas he asked questions like "Where do you pray?" and "How do you pray?" and did not understand my questions about secularization. Seeing religion as more than a set of propositions turned out to be a more fruitful approach, and I saw first-hand the disastrous consequences of thinking about religion as something that can be defined simply as belief in propositions.

The theory I propose is a 'maximalist theory', as opposed to a reductionist approach. This characterization is linked to my aim to think of religion as internal to the basic experiential conditions of human life, or, rather, to analyze how the basic workings of religion can be seen as emerging out of these conditions. Religions do not belong to a specific area or a specific realm of experience. When we call something 'sacred' or 'religious', it is not because 'it' is essentially so, but because we have pragmatic reasons for naming it so. Accordingly, because there is no such realm as the sacred or religious as such, we instead have to look at different realms of experience, where we can identify the conditions for human experiences. Based on this

---

[5] See David Morgan, "Introduction", in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 5, with reference to C.S. Peirce.

[6] I define practices with Andreas Reckwitz as "a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." See Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices", *European Journal of Social Theory* 5.2 (2002): 249–250. However, as the main point in this book is not to go into detail about practices as such, I do not intend to develop the implications of a theory of practice further in the present context.

investigation, it may be shown how religions, as understood above, are linked deeply and internally to human experience.

A maximalist theory is directed against three 'fronts'. The first is the common approach to religions in the classic tradition of critique, that is, describing religion as "nothing but…" The second is the immunization strategy employed by religious groups who say, "Religion cannot be comprehended or explained by those who do not believe because religion has to do with a spiritual realm that is only accessible to believers". The third is the contemporary variant of the first, which sees religion from an evolutionary perspective and interprets all of its functions and content accordingly. In different ways, all three of these modes of interpreting or explaining religions and the religious will occupy us here, as they represent restrictions and reductions compared to a maximalist approach.

The four realms of experience I will use as the basic backdrop for the following, I call the natural, the socio-cultural, the psychological, and the mystical. Although I do not believe these realms can be separated, I distinguish between them because there are elements we experience in each of them that cannot be reduced to what is enabled by conditions and capacities in other realms, or, so I will argue. We cannot understand nature simply as a result of culture, or vice versa. Furthermore, we cannot understand our psychology, or what I occasionally call the 'inner' or 'personal' realm, apart from, or independent of, the social and cultural realm. Finally, there are, as I will argue, some occurrences in the mystical realm that we cannot explain or interpret based simply on what we know about the conditions of other realms. Taken together, then, I see the analytical distinction between these realms of experience as a tool for identifying different *layers* of experience. To maintain the need for distinguishing between these layers is also a way to work around reductionist accounts, such as the naturalist one, when it comes to understanding religion.

Moreover, we need to see these realms as interdependent. From a phenomenological point of view, none of these realms can exist without the others (perhaps with the exception of the mystical realm, which does not seem to condition specific phenomena in the other realms). To understand something in the natural realm requires language and often culturally transmitted knowledge as well. To understand my feelings, I need to know something about what happened in my own social and relational history. To understand what happens in the social and cultural realm, we need to make some suppositions about peoples' motives, desires, and orientations. We also have some knowledge, though it is not always sufficient, about conditions in other realms to help us interpret and understand some of the occurrences in the mystical realm. Experiences in this realm also are dependent on language originating in the social and cultural realm to be specified, determined, communicated, discussed, or interpreted.

So far, I have identified three layers of reductive approaches to religion that a maximalist theory seeks to overcome. The theory is directed against specific forms of disciplinary reductionism; it is also directed against approaches to religion that view it mainly as doctrine or as cognitively formulated opinions about the world. Finally, it is directed against any attempt to restrict the impact of 'religions' and the 'religious' to specific realms of human experiences.[7]

In summary, when asked, "What is new in this book?" I would suggest that it offers a way of seeing religions as providing resources for orientation and transformation in the various realms of human experience. Moreover, the combination of orientation and transformation is essential. Although I see this work as a contribution to the discipline of philosophy of religion, I repeatedly step outside the borders of the discipline, visiting neighboring disciplines (especially theology, sociology of religion, and psychology of religion) in order to flesh out the argument.

The thesis I am building here may seem simple, but in reality it is not. I will argue that what this thesis implies complicates much thinking about religion because it requires us to rethink religion, in general and in specifics. Moreover, it also challenges us to rethink the tasks for the discipline of philosophy of religion. Much of the book, therefore, is devoted to analyzing material that displays different aspects of the rethinking required, and it will do so in ways that make what initially looks simple and plain, complicated and challenging. A consequence of this procedure is that the material used here displays a certain eclecticism and is not at all exhaustive of what can be said about the different topics I address. Hence, the materials I choose serve as explorative pointers towards realms of research and reflection that can substantiate the thesis further and make it more nuanced and complicated, or even lead to its revision.

Given the numerous theories about religion, it is impossible to spell out in detail how my argument relates to all of them. I will, however, at certain

---

[7] Accordingly, I see the following as being in accordance with an "agnostic" program like that of M. Vazquez, who writes: "A scholar working within a non-reductive materialist framework, thus, begins with the acknowledgment that the practitioners' appeals to the supernatural, god(s), the sacred, or the holy have powerful material consequences for how they build their identities, narratives, practices, and environments. Thus, it behooves scholars of religion to take seriously the native actor's lived world and to explore the biological, social, and historical conditions that make religious experiences possible as well as the effects these experiences have on self, culture, and nature." Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5. The position of Vazquez is interesting to note also because he, despite of the "materialist" position he advocates, nevertheless also takes a stand against "vulgar materialism" and pleads for a "cultural realism" that allows for a perspective on the cultural and elements of identity and their causal efficacy (ibid, 6).

points discuss related positions and points in other scholars' work, and I have also included one chapter in which I seek to show how other theories about religion (especially from sociology, since I am concerned with empirical religion) may prove fruitful for my analysis of how religion can be described as resources for orientation and transformation.

The structure of the book

The procedure that the following chapters are based on aims to develop an accumulative argument building up from a selection of what I find to be the most relevant material in order to make my points. This approach attempts to deepen the main thesis of the book by presenting and discussing different types of materials. The choice of this procedure also means that the following pages are part of an interdisciplinary study where the borders between different disciplines that deal with religion become blurry.

In Chapter One, I begin by pointing to some of the challenges facing anyone addressing the topic of religion, and I argue that there can be no wholly neutral position acceptable to everyone. In addition, I present and develop the main thesis, provide a larger sketch of the realms of experience and examine a recent discussion about the ends of contemporary philosophy of religion. What I gain by combining my thesis with the contemporary discussion of disciplinary aims is that I am able to connect my thesis and approach to this discussion and thereby argue for a move from a philosophy of religion to a philosophy of *religions*.

In Chapter Two my argument draws on sources concerned with semiosis, symbols, language, and ascription of meaning. I start with a reconstruction of the theory of semiotics launched by Charles S. Peirce, which I then relate to aspects of Ingolf Dalferth's philosophy of religion. Against this backdrop, I then analyze the main features of Ann Taves' work on religious experiences. This combination enables me to clarify main points in the socio-cultural realm with regard to religion and experiences deemed religious. Thus, we can identify religion as mediating the experience of things set apart by means of semiotic processes.

In Chapter Three I revisit the different realms of experience and discuss their relevance as an analytical and non-reductionist tool in relation to contemporary cognitive science of religion. Although the naturalist outlook is the main frame of this chapter, it also demonstrates the need for, and relevance of, other approaches to religion, and thereby contributes to substantiating the maximalist approach. In pointing to limitations implied in a merely naturalist outlook, I nevertheless also want to affirm its relevance in the study of religion, as it opens up important questions about how religions

work, despite its neglect of much of the *content* of concretely existing religious practices.

Chapter Four takes its point of departure in a review of different theories about religion and their role in the social realm; in the presentation and analysis of these theories, I show how many of them seem to imply elements be related to practices of orientation and transformation. The chapter thereby contributes to substantiating the thesis with regard to the socio-cultural realm of experience.

In Chapter Five, I develop a similar strategy for showing the relevance of religion as experienced in the personal realm: first, I take my point of departure from self-psychology. Against this backdrop, I show how Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead's sociology of religious emotion significantly contributes to how religious symbols are ordered, oriented, and transformed in the psychological realm, as well as the social realm. Linking these theoretical approaches to insights from attachment theory, I am again able to return to considerations about the theme of change in religion. This topic, I see as constitutive, and of crucial importance for my argument about religion as a resource for transformation.

The theme of transformation is taken up again in Chapter Six where I analyze in detail the theory of *religion as motion* developed by Geir Afdal. Because he sees religion as something that people do and focuses on learning, we thereby get an in-depth approach to transformation.

Chapter Seven deals with the theme of tradition and its relevance for orientation. By discussing Hervieu-Leger's *religion as a chain of memory,* I am able to spell out more clearly why we need to see the elements that are at work in religion, orientation, transformation, and legitimation, as organically and internally linked to each other.

In Chapter Eight, I explore experiences related to both the natural and the mystical realm, and I argue for their relevance and for a non-reductionist approach. I also argue that we can do this without claiming that we should use these experiences in arguing for the existence of a supernatural realm.

Chapter Nine offers some metaphors for interpreting the main thesis: Home, Score and Play, which also enable me to discuss Thomas A. Tweed's theory of religion, which comes close to, and overlaps with, my own maximalist theory.

In Chapter Ten, I examine the relation between orientation, transformation, and *wisdom* and I name the particular normative elements I see as constructive for further discourse about the relevance of religion to human life, as well as for avoiding an identification of religion with ignorance, a point that is taken up in the final chapter.

In the concluding Chapter Eleven, I summarize the normative outcome of my analysis and briefly touch on the relevance of my argument for key topics in the contemporary discourse on religion. Here I also present brief

considerations of the extent to which religious traditions still have something to offer in terms of wisdom about what it means to live as a human being.

Chapter 1

Religions in and beyond philosophy of religion

It is a mystery that the world is. Religions (in plural) emerge out of this mystery and combine the wonder *that* the world is, with ideas, perceptions, and practices related to *how* it should be and how we need to maneuver in it. The genesis of religion is in many ways like that of a child being born into the world: once there, she tries to orient herself; once there, she cannot but respond if something is not like she needs it to be. Religious resources help humans orient themselves to the present, as well as providing the intuitions needed to change the world. In this respect, religion is as much about change as it is about maintaining a given and perceived order.

If we want to understand religions in general, we cannot start from a specific religious doctrine or belief. As indicated already, the argument of this book is that such beliefs are secondary, although they play a large role in how one understands religion within the discipline of the philosophy of religion. I argue that we need a comprehensive theory of religion that focuses more on what religions do and how they do it than on approaches that take as their fundamental starting-point the beliefs of one specific religious tradition, or a reductionist approach that says that religion is "nothing but…" The following is an attempt to sketch a maximalist theory of religion on this basis. Because it will have a say over against both emic understandings of religion originating in specific traditions, and over against fashionable approaches to religion in the scientific community, it will not be neutral because such an approach to religion is not possible.

The impossibility of a neutral approach to religion

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that there are so many contemporary opinions about religion. Publicly and academically many different theories about religion seem to flourish, and for good reasons. Religion is articulated or expressed in so many ways, relating to the wide variety of realms and dimensions of human life, that the common metaphor about a group of blind men describing an elephant seems apt when applied here. Religion is like an elephant that may be touched and explained from many different angles. Those who do so may be right from their point of view, as it would be hard

not to hit some of the target, but it is not reasonable to expect that any one of them will have the full picture. In a similar way, this book cannot attempt to paint the full picture of religion; nevertheless, its ambition is to describe some basic features of religions in a manner that takes many different accounts into consideration. This ambition does not mean that I explore every theory of religion; instead, what I will propose is a framework for understanding religions that takes different theories about religion into account, but more importantly, also helps frame and interpret the variety of phenomena religions display.

As Linda Woodhead has pointed out, there is a difference between the *definition* of religion and the *concept* of religion. Problems apply to both. As for the definition of religion, one should not despair at the difficulties in establishing a definition. She writes,

> In this regard 'religion' is little different from 'the economy', 'politics', 'society' or 'history' – and scholars in all these areas proceed quite happily without necessarily being able to define their object of study. The difficulty of definition arises from the fact that these are not indexical terms but general concepts which direct attention to complex constellations and aspects of social and material relations for certain purposes.[1]

The point about the complexity of religions is well taken: given the diversity of how religions appear and how they function, it is hard to claim that there can be neutral ground for approaching them. However, a non-neutral approach to religion does not mean that one needs to adopt a religious or non-religious stance, or even an anti-religious stance.

My approach here is informed by knowledge (albeit limited) of different religious traditions, especially Christianity, but it is deliberately *not* a Christian theory of religion, a position for which I will offer reasons below. However, in the approach I adopt, a clear normative element is suggested at this point. Viewing Christianity as one religion among others was not a fashionable approach in the first half of the twentieth century. The theology of Karl Barth, in particular, saw true Christianity as a faith in revelation and not as a religion among others. This view was quickly taken up in popular Christianity and until recently has shaped the approach of many Christians to other religious traditions. Today, however, it has become untenable largely due to an increasing awareness of religious pluralism within the boundaries of Western society. My claim here, however, is that if we are to understand Christianity at all, we need to see it as one religion among others – and therefore, we also need to work out a clear understanding of religion in general. The latter is the task of this book, whereas the former task (an

[1] See Linda Woodhead, "Five Concepts of Religion", *International Review of Sociology*. 21.1 (2011): 121–43, here 121.