



Review Essay

Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion

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Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion (Routledge), edited by Michael Stausberg, presents a series of reviews of some of the major “contemporary” theories of religion. The chapters are surveys of the theories and as such cannot deal with any of them in great depth. Despite this fact, the book should be a useful starting point for students interested in theory and a way for scholars of religion to get their bearings on some of the latest theories. Those more skeptical of the possibility of grand theories, whom Stausberg refers to as “anti-theorists” (14) will probably be less satisfied since many of their concerns are, frankly, not the concern of this book. However at least one contributor, Hughes, wonders whether general theories about religion are possible at all. The vast majority of the theories come out of the cognitive science of religion. The remaining few could be divided into social-systems perspectives and rhetorical approaches that argue for a clear religious or atheist agenda. Stausberg is correct to conclude that the volume offers ample “food for further thought” (292), as such the book is highly recommended. In what follows I summarize the main currents in each chapter and offer limited comment of my own.

In their chapter, Engler and Gardiner provide a somewhat erratic review of Lawson and McCauley's (ritual) theory of religion, trying to do a lot of noble things in a short amount of space. They provide good summary of the numerous criticisms of the theory. Like subsequent chapters in the volume however, this one is too short to go into any depth about the theory and the criticisms, so the reader does not get a solid sense of either. Engler and Gardiner also present an insightful new criticism based on a neglected semantic argument in *Rethinking Religion*. Almost half of the chapter focuses on this dimension of the argument, a marvelous five pages for any student of the semantics of religion. Curiously though, the reviewers neglect the very important argument presented by Davis (2007), a Davidsonian critique of Lawson and McCauley.¹ Though I sympathize strongly with the argument and desire to take semantics more seriously, this may distort the overall picture of the "contemporary theory." Unlike most of the other chapters in the volume this chapter is as much about Engler and Gardiner's theory as it is about Lawson and McCauley.

Saler writes an excellent and concise summary of Guthrie's theory and those that influenced it (Tyler and Horton). He points out that Guthrie provides more of a theory of anthropomorphism than religion as such. Saler does not make clear the differences between animism, agency, intentionality, and anthropomorphism, though this is probably because Guthrie is not so clear about them in the two iterations of his theory and because the subsequent literature has made a mess of them. For a clearer view, Lisdorf (2007) is a good place to start.² Agency is something we attribute to, for example, dots on a screen, when we perceive them as animate. This is what Lisdorf and others call *biological motion*. It is helpful for animals to attribute biological, self-propelled motion, and better to be safe than sorry, for example, when a twig snaps in the bush and we are rushed full of adrenaline. For Guthrie the central element of anthropomorphism is the attribution of complex symbolic capacities, that is, language. As Saler notes, Guthrie

¹) Scott Davis, "Donald Davidson, Anomalous Monism and the Study of Religion." *MTSR* 19 (2007):200–231.

²) See Anders Lisdorf, "What's HIDD'n in the HADD?" *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7 (2007):341–353.

emphasizes “the attribution of will, purpose, and intelligence to the non-human world,” and above all “capacities to send and receive messages” (44). *Contra* Saler then, Guthrie’s theory does not revolve so much around “what we today term the attribution of agency,” (46) but rather is closer to what Lisdorf calls the HIDD, “Hyperactive Intentionality Detector”.

This function also seems closer to what we now call “mentalizing.” Mentalizing is what anthropomorphism involves over and above animistic agency. All animals are sensitive to agency, but what sets human animals apart is extreme sensitivity to language or “intelligence.” The primary domain of mentalizing and anthropomorphism is folk psychology while the primary domain for animistic agency is folk physics (and perhaps biology) with its distinction between animate and inanimate: objects tend to stay at rest unless acted on by an outside force, unless of course, they are *alive*. Aside from this very interesting connection to subsequent research in the cognitive science of religion, Saler also wants to push Guthrie on the nonhuman or superhuman features of gods. In other words he wants Guthrie to account for the “counterintuitive” features of religion. The distinction appears to ride on whether one considers these mechanisms automated features of perception, or automated features of cognition and memory. Perhaps these two modes are not that far apart if we accept Guthrie’s premise that perception is always interpretation. This would leave room for combining the relevance-based,³ epidemiological approach of Boyer, with Guthrie’s perceptual strategy approach, which also appears relevance driven in that the best bets “are those with the highest informational payoffs and lowest risks” (49).

In the next chapter, Benavides surveys the entire catalog of Burkert’s writings about religion, rather than focusing on a limited few as the previous two chapters. Benavides lays out the most important concepts in Burkert’s theory and how they relate to one another. Burkert’s argument is grounded in ethology in the sense that he finds adaptive continuity between human behavior and the behavior of other animals. Benavides thus cogently makes the case for the usefulness of Burkert’s

³ See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995), *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell).

theory in the cognitive science of religion. The brevity of the chapter requires that Benavides can only mention a number of interesting theories and concepts that he derives from Burkert — such as the connection between ritual and “practical concerns” such as eating meat, dealing with social hierarchy, and displaying fitness — and the important role that emotions (like fear), acts of violence, and meta-representing play in religion. The footnotes are meant to direct the reader in the right direction, but the ideas are thrown out so quickly, one has difficulty delimiting Burkert’s actual theory of religion. Perhaps this is necessary to get at the density that clearly characterizes Burkert’s reflections on religion. So, much like the previous chapters, this chapter acts as a kind of entry point into the theory but does not offer substantial grounding in that theory. It whets the appetite but does not provide much sustenance.

Segal’s chapter is on Rappaport’s ritual theory of religion. The chapter pivots on the charge of functionalism. Segal argues that Rappaport’s early functionalism evolved into formalism, and Segal finds both problematic. With regard to the former, Segal reiterates the well-worn criticism of functionalism first set out by Hempel and emphasized strongly in the study of religion by Penner (288). The gist is that functionalism usually fails as a form of explanation on logical grounds. Segal notes that Rappaport failed to address the central point of the critique, that functionalism usually commits the fallacy of affirming the consequence. In other words, “it works backwards” (71). Segal actually prefers the hard-line functional approach Rappaport took in his early opus *Pigs for the Ancestors*, even though he disagrees with functionalism, to Rappaport’s later work that departs from causal functionalism to a definitional and metaphysical formalism. His legacy, he argues, “rests with *Pigs*” (77). This is presumably because of the valuable contribution Rappaport’s ecological approach provides to the study of religion. The rest of Segal’s chapter on Rappaport’s later work primarily takes issue with Rappaport’s inordinate focus on ritual at the expense of belief. Overall the chapter is primarily a critique, so to some extent it assumes previous familiarity with Rappaport. Since *Pigs* was published in 1968 perhaps it is a misnomer to call this a “contemporary” theory of religion, a complaint that could be leveled at many of the entries in the volume, though of course all of the theories in the

book are being chewed over by scholars of religion *right now*; perhaps “recent” works better.

Alles’s chapter on Stark’s sociological approach does a good job at both explicating the theoretical heart of the approach and offering nuanced, lucid criticism. Ultimately Alles thinks an economic theory is a necessary Lockean correlate to the current trend toward Kantian cognition. One cannot explain religion without clarity on how cognitive constraints are activated by decision making agents in the real world. Religion turns out to be rational, for the most part, given certain cognitive constraints and the limited nature of information. But Alles and Stark have quite different ideas about what this rationality means. Stark’s version of rational-choice theory (“think cost benefit analysis, the ‘law’ of supply and demand,” 84) generates a “Reaganesque” (83) picture of the religious marketplace, which “neglects the role that reciprocity plays in human decision-making in interactive contexts” (96). In sum Alles and Stark disagree considerably on the nature of intelligent agents and their place in a religious environment. Alles would seem to lean towards a notion of a Bayesian agent, who makes provisional, probabilistic decisions in light of limited information. The environment plays far less a limiting role than in Stark’s theory which Alles considers static and places too many constraints on intelligent agents (see Alles discussion of the failure of the concept of “tension” between individual and environment to account for religious choices, 94). The constraints tend to create systems where the optimal outcome is Protestant Christianity. Thus Stark’s theory “tacitly presumes the characteristics it seeks to explain” (96). I think this criticism may apply to all theories of religion in the book, and to most theories of religion in general, perhaps because as Frankenberry puts it: “Unlike other contexts in which we study people’s economic status or political actions, frequently dispensing with their own intentions, desires, beliefs, hopes, and fears, there is no distinguishable religious context that can be discerned apart from people’s propositional attitudes.”⁴

Beyer has the difficult task of encapsulating Luhmann’s theory of religion in twelve pages. Instead of trying to present his whole theory

⁴ Nancy Frankenberry (2007), “Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental,” in Santiago Zabala (ed.), *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (McGill-Queen’s University Press), 273–296 (286).

he focuses on “religion as communication,” paying particular attention to Luhmann’s ruminations on ritual. This is a prudent procedure and allows him to focus on those aspects of the theory most relevant to scholars of religion, at the same time giving a sense of the complexity in Luhmann’s thought.

Society is an emergent property of communication. While the human body and individual human consciousness are necessary for society to take place, Luhmann regards communication as its most fundamental aspect. Individuals are not the primary components of society, but rather “communications,” which are syntheses of three “selections”: “information, utterance (*Mitteilung*), understanding” (101). The first is the content of communication, the second is the fact of communication (which sounds quite similar to Grice’s informational and communicative intentions), and the third is the reception of the utterance. Communication emerges only in the context of this synthesis. A primary characteristic of most forms of communication appears to be that it is “risky:” it is contingent, likely to fail, or uncertain.

Religion enters this story primarily as a paradoxical form of communication in which, especially in the case of ritual rigidity, the risk is limited. On the one hand, religious communication is theoretically suspicious because of the problematic ontological status of gods; in other words religious people are not really communicating with anyone. More importantly for Luhmann, ritual is not communication because “it does not differentiate between the informative and performative acts of communication, between *information* and *utterance*” (105). The content, so Luhmann thinks, is basically equivalent to the speech act itself. The medium is strictly the message; there is no risk. On the other hand, religion *is* communication, structured around “the core distinction between transcendent and imminent, or what Luhmann calls the binary code of religion” (102); it is “only as communication . . . that religion exists in society” (103). The ontological status of gods, or “the degree to which anthropomorphic beings can operate as real actors in society,” is actually not at issue in Luhmann’s theory of communication because the tripartite “selections” noted above are not based on communicators but rather communications. Communication is attributed to actors in this process but it does not derive from them.

As Beyer goes on to intimate, perhaps this so-called paradox is merely enunciating two different aspects of religion: revelatory events,

by which I mean performances where people pretend and believe they are communicating with “anthropomorphic beings,” and subsequent detailed interpretation around those performances. It is ironic that such a developed social thinker as Luhmann should revert back to an individualistic model of communication when he sets his sights on religion. In performance the actors, since they follow a script, are communicating with the audience more than they are with one another. Those revelatory moments are part of a broader communicatory process, not communicative events in themselves. So as Beyer suggest, perhaps his theory ultimately implicates an underlying Protestant conception of religion, in the sense that religion is understood as a private attitude of faith (110).

Day provides a characteristically lucid and philosophically sharp summary and criticism of Newberg et al.’s “neurotheological” theory of religion. Day presents a surprisingly balanced account of their position, despite the fact that the science behind it is quite controversial among neuroscientists.⁵ The most fundamental problem, though Day does not express it in quite this way, is that they base their theory of religion on “mystical experience,” an error most students of religion stopped perpetuating many years ago. The primary engine for the theory, according to Day, is SPECT brain scans that reveal deactivation in the left posterior superior parietal lobe, which “is thought to regulate our awareness of our surroundings” (118), when religious professionals (such as Buddhists and Franciscans) do their thing (“at the peaks” of meditation and prayer). The authors think the experiment is isolating an impairment in the “ability to distinguish between *self* and *non-self*” (118). From this type of reasoning Newberg and his colleagues apparently go on to assert that the mystical experience is real, in other words, really a communion with superhuman agency.

The most ironic point in Day’s criticism is that Newberg thinks the neurological firings vindicate first person accounts of mystical experience. At the same time, those first person accounts are jettisoned and replaced by “homogenized descriptions” of Newberg et al.’s own makings.

⁵ For a more detailed criticism of the “neuroscience”, see Uffe Schjoedt, “The Religious Brain: A General Introduction to the Experimental Neuroscience of Religion.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21 (2009):315–318, 322–328.

Catholic nuns and Buddhist nuns actually do not describe the same experience.

For Day, the book is just plain wrong in its “modified natural theological case for the neurological authenticity of mystical experience,” and “the slippery philosophical transition from talking about the neurological foundations of religious experience to discussing the noetic content of these experiences.” However, it is “*importantly* wrong” in its limiting of what counts as religion to the special, the impractical, the temporary; to a unique sphere of life that would need a dedicated neurological mechanism (126). This is where Day sees what he calls neurotheology’s rival “cognitive science of religion” offering an important corrective, because it regards religious cognition as largely continuous with the rest of cognition.

On this note it is interesting that Day allows for only two camps in a naturalistic approach to religion: neurotheology and cognitive science of religion. The first we have discussed, though I have doubts about whether it can rightly be called a naturalistic approach (cognitive architecture evolved so that we can experience non-natural divinity). The second examines how universal cognitive architecture shapes and constrains religion, where religious thought and behavior is a meaningless byproduct of these structures (116). However, surely there have been more than two camps “over the last quarter century.” One notorious omission would be the “Aarhus School” of the cognitive science of religion, though Day perhaps sees this school as unimportant or a bastard child of the hard line cognitive approach to religion. I would disagree and see it as an important middle ground between the two camps.

Jensen tackles the “standard model of the cognitive science of religion” in his chapter. His presentation of the standard model and its alternative is fair and balanced. He focuses on the work of Boyer and Pyysiainen, though far more on the former than the latter. A substantial part of the chapter is spent on Sperber, who Jensen credits with providing the initial theoretical foundation for the standard model.

Jensen does a good job laying out Boyer’s contribution to theorizing about religion. For Boyer, innate, universally occurring mental architecture (“mental modules”) constrains religious concepts. This architecture is characterized by sets of independent expectations about the

world: intuitive expectations about objects (folk physics), agents/minds (folk psychology), and living things (folk biology). These expectations apply to specific “ontological” categories of things that are also intuitive: person, animal, plant, natural object, and artifact. When any of these three intuitive expectations are tweaked (breached or transferred) in their application to one of the five categories a counter-intuitive concept results. So we have a three by five matrix of fifteen basic counter-intuitive templates. These counter-intuitive templates are the cognitive basis for the memorable concepts that populate religion. Religion turns out to be quite a natural phenomenon that requires just a bit of tweaking of intuitive psychology to be produced and remembered.

Jensen presents a productive distinction in theories about religion between subject matter and theoretical object (130). In the case of Boyer, he argues that Boyer’s subject matter may be religion, but his object (objective) is to describe universal features of the mind. This is perhaps why Boyer is less concerned with explaining why people actually interact with these types of agents (the so-called Mickey Mouse problem), though he has some interesting ideas in that direction (it has to do with strategic information and relevance). This is where Jensen’s juxtaposition of Boyer with Pyysiainen is useful, because Pyysiainen incorporates Damasio’s work on emotion into Boyer’s theory of religion in an attempt to solve the Mickey Mouse problem (among others). Jensen does not go into very much detail about the theory, but instead criticizes Pyysiainen’s stance as a materialist (144–145).

Since Boyer played a central role in setting up the foundations of the cognitive science of religion, a critique of Boyer is also a critique of the standard model. For the most part, the critique centers on three related features: the standard model is individualistic, does not pay enough attention to language and intentionality, and offers “a rather narrow spectrum of what the cognitive sciences can offer” (146). With regard to the first, Jensen is at pains to show that culture (and religion) is not merely epiphenomenal but may actually be (downwardly) causal on the brain. With regard to the second, the mind is not fully in the head, so cognitive approaches miss the mark if they only look there. Language and its limitations, in fact, have been rather poorly theorized in standard CSR. This is ironic since much of the movement emerged

out of linguistics. But regardless, as Laidlaw notes, since intersubjective, historically contextual, dynamics provide the space in which ideas are spread, they cannot be ignored in theorizing about religion (148). Intersubjectivity includes “self-interpretation,” one’s own reasons for acting in specific ways, which is “affective,” i.e. causal. With regard to the third, Jensen argues that the mainstream of cognitive science appears more open to cultural approaches than the cognitive science of religion, for example, in the work of Tomasello, Donald, Frith, and LeDoux (146).

In the next chapter Bulbulia examines Atran’s *In Gods We Trust* and other work. He adeptly tells us how and where Atran fits in with the rest of the cognitive science of religion. Atran initiated the cognitive science of religion’s interest in something like counter-intuitive agents (along with Sperber and probably before Boyer), calling them “minimally counter-intuitive concepts” (160). Atran found that such concepts were not necessarily more memorable than intuitive concepts; only once they become embedded in narratives that combine intuitive and counter-intuitive concepts do they become more memorable. Atran thus pointed rightly to broader belief sets, since concepts are not transmitted as unitary sites of information all by themselves. Atran combined this idea further with Guthrie’s theory of anthropomorphism to show that it is not simply an issue of memory that makes religious concepts so widespread, but *perception*, in the sense that we have a perceptual bias to infer agency.

Atran’s other lasting legacy has been his incorporation of costly signaling theory into the study of religion. That theory is derived from biology, where it is argued that organisms often use display signals to advertise their fitness. These signals are energy demanding and therefore seem to run counter to the evolutionary paradigm. But what costs the organism in energy lost, it gains in reproductive success (finding better mates). In the case of humans, this idea of advertising is extended to costly behavior as a signal of membership and devotion to the group. Requiring these signals from individuals is a way, in the long run, to avoid moochers on the system. Groups thus encourage “hard to fake” signals. Such signals are hard to fake because, among other things, they take energy investment that a faker would not be willing to pay. The theory thus represents the integration of the

economies of biological and linguistic semiosis. Bulbulia wants to integrate these three legacies of Atran (MCI, agency, costly-signaling), to suggest the idea that there is something about counter-intuitive agents that lend themselves well to this type of advertising.

Bulbulia packs a lot more into his review of Atran. He suggests important differences between Atran and Whitehouse on modes of religion. He presents his own interesting pet distinction between “iReligion” and “eReligion” based on Chomsky’s distinction between internal and external linguistic systems, and with similar ramifications. He criticizes Atran for not paying enough attention to the role of culture in evolution (i.e. co-evolution), in effect arguing that eReligion can have downward effect on iReligion. Bulbulia is also quite critical of the idea that “general learning” (or general intelligence 168, 169) might be part of the explanation of religion, though he does not explain why.

The ultimate disagreement between Bulbulia and Atran is that Bulbulia thinks religion is an adaptation while Atran thinks religion is a by-product of adaptation. For Bulbulia, who thinks there is a “religion faculty,” (166) this is a major “deficit” of Atran’s approach (167). However Atran does not stray far from the functionalist tree: religion appeals to people because, for one, it satisfies “the tragedy of cognition,” which is human awareness of our own death and finitude (165).

In the next chapter, Bulbulia and Frean bravely set out on some unpopular theoretical territory through the lens of David Sloan Wilson’s theory of religion, opening up illuminating and challenging questions along the way. The chapter is a defense of a Wilson’s theory of religion as a group-level adaptation. The theory is based on Wilson’s work on multi-level (or group) selection, which contends that not only individual organisms or genes may serve as sites of natural selection, but groups themselves. Group selection evolves through the property of altruism. Altruistic behavior in cooperative groups promotes higher fitness than individualistic selfish behavior. But altruistic behavior is most “evolvable” in conditions where individuals can reliably signal their solidarity. Religion, so our authors argue, promotes altruism and solidarity, and evolved for precisely this reason. Religion generates useful fictions that promote this function (184); that is, religions evolve precisely because they promote in-group altruism. Aside from the role

of institutions in this process (Bulbulia and Freaan think policing institutions do not play a big role in this process, while Wilson thinks they do), our three authors do not disagree on very much. They admit that this is a “methodological futurism” in the sense that Wilson’s approach to religion is largely programmatic (190).

Of course there are numerous avenues to criticize this approach. As the authors note, the two most common are the critique of group-level selection and cultural evolution. They also intimate that the critique of functionalism is not a problem, though they should read Segal’s chapter noted above. The problem with functionalism is not really that it is empirically problematic, but logically so. For example, Wilson describes why religion may be sufficient but not necessary for altruism. A further drawback is the vagueness about religion. When the discussion is not vague, it is circular. In other words it is hard to see whether Wilson, Bulbulia, and Freaan are talking about the evolution of religion or the evolution of solidarity. Perhaps to them, these are no different, but then one wonders why we need the word religion, with all its baggage. This slipperiness may get them into trouble, when for example they make the dubious claim that “religious culture” (they often use religion as an adjective not a noun) is more resistant to change than other “domains,” like politics. When we consider that tribal kingship (bigmen) and warlordism are still probably the most common form of politics in the world today, we see that many other “domains” are just as conservative (and of course this is a classic historical question). They suggest this is not due to the relatively static nature of religious scripture, but rather some fundamental dynamic of religious culture itself.

One point that I think especially deserves more investigation, and may even help us understand the semantics of religion, is the connection Bulbulia and Freaan make between hard to test convictions about (often invisible) counter-intuitive agents and costly signals (184). These beliefs may be epistemically costly in the way that other signals are energetically costly; one involves “information” and the other energy costs, which are perhaps two versions of the same thing (energy). In other words, conviction about often unobservable agents may serve as a better basis for costly signaling than “real facts.” If you devoutly believe clearly obvious things about the world, this could be as much due to epistemic hunger as cultural solidarity. But if you

devoutly believe clearly false things about the world, this may signal something entirely different; part of its cost is its falsity.

In the next chapter, Wiebe examines Lewis-Williams and Pearce's "explanation" of the origin of religion. Based on the comparison of rock art among contemporary hunter-gatherers (the San) and cave paintings dated to the Upper Paleolithic, these authors argue that religion originates in altered states of consciousness. These states ("products") are induced in the brain by various means and religion "makes sense of" them (202, 203). The most primitive form of religion, the "ur-religion" is therefore "some form of hunter-gatherer shamanism" (203). All religions have this ecstatic component and "involve altering human consciousness" (198). From Wiebe's description one gets the sense that their argument is quite a bit more complex and nuanced than this simplistic argument. The authors appear to be trying to establish a middle ground between neuroscience and culture, acknowledging the role that the "social contract" must play in relation to the "consciousness contract" (199). For example, they argue that the "Neolithic revolution" was a change in "symbolic consciousness" that caused changes in subsistence practices rather than the reverse (197). Religion is, in effect, the way in which people come to terms with changes in human consciousness (199).

Wiebe is surprisingly soft in his critique of this theory. By and large it sounds as if he approves of it, despite the obvious age-old problem of grounding an entire theory of religion in something called "religious experience." The authors seem to acknowledge that their theory is as much about art as religion, arguing that the two are intertwined, and that such art "gives illuminating clues" about its creator's beliefs (203). Religion and art both appear to spring from decoupling or meta-representation and it is thus likely that religion and art arose about the same time. But this approach appears to reduce religion to art and aesthetic experience. The idea is that there is some pure universal experience in altered states of consciousness that all people are trying to fathom. One doubts whether all religion is based on altered states of consciousness; and even if it were, experiencing cannot precede "making sense of" in any meaningful sense.

Though Wiebe mentions a version of this criticism (203), perhaps it is so basic to the study of religion, he did not feel the need to reiterate

it. Instead he somewhat half-heartedly focuses on a neurophysiological critique of Lewis-Williams and Pearce, which argues that most drug induced altered states do not correspond to their “three stages of trance” model. The authors responded by saying they do not argue that the states must be drug induced.

In the next chapter Hughes offers a robust critique and summary of Tweed’s theory of religion, set out in his book *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. We get a good sense of the theory from Tweed’s definition of religion: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (54/212). Thus for Tweed religions are emotional processes, “flowing” though time and space, that develop based on “organic (e.g. neural, physiological, emotional, and cognitive) and cultural (e.g. linguistic, tropic, and ritualistic) constraints” (212). Religions further “orientate and help devotees locate themselves individually, locally, and cosmically” and differ from other cultural “framing of emotions” by drawing on supra-human forces (219). But religions do not just situate, they also motivate movement through “terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic,” crossings (213).

For the most part Hughes’s chapter focuses on the very possibility of a general theory of religion. This problematic comes from two directions. First, citing the work of McCutcheon and Fitzgerald, Hughes seems critical of not just Tweed’s definition of religion, but any definition that would somehow privilege religion over other cultural forms. Second, he accuses Tweed of conflating two distinct intellectual projects (noted famously by JZ Smith, 216): the ethnographic and the encyclopedic. While the former is local, contextual, and real, the latter is categorical, universalizing, and shadowy. Hughes thinks Tweed’s own local fieldwork with a Cuban community in Miami is rich, real, and complex, but when he moves to the task of generating a universal theory of religion, all is lost, and little is gained.

Hughes appears to be what Stausberg called in the Introduction an “anti-theorist.” (14) Aside from the point that Tweed’s conceptualization of religion is largely metaphorical, his critique could apply to any theory of religion. He lauds Orsi’s indication that religion can only be studied at the local level (221). In an inductive mode, when local

details are subsumed in larger theories we lose precisely those nuances we hoped to explain, while in a deductive mode, when local details are forced to fit larger theories they become distorted. To be fair, Hughes poses most of these points as questions, questions that get to the very heart of the edited volume as a whole. A small point would be to note that retreating to the local level does not rid you of theories. Thus anti-theory has a tendency to be made up of a bunch of little theories that a scholar either refuses to acknowledge or that do not amount to much.

Seiwert presents Rue's "theory" of religion. It is not so much a theory as an attempt at a noble deception to create a "new religion" of "eco-centric morality" (237) as an alternative to consumerism. The punch-line of Rue's mythology comes at the end of the chapter where we are told that in a previous book Rue, "argues for the necessity of inventing a 'noble lie... to reenchant the universe' as an adaptive strategy 'for opposing the maladaptive truth of nihilism...'" (239). Thus Seiwert rightly concludes that Rue's book is a myth masquerading as theory. But anyway, it is a rather compelling myth.

The basic idea is functionalist: religions ideally promote emotions that lead to wholeness and social coherence, which Rue sees as "the ultimate purpose of human meaning and existence" (231). Rue pushes this idea further arguing that evolution also has a meaning, a purpose, a "telos": to "endure and reproduce" (229). So not only do we have myth masquerading as theory, we have an outright distortion of the theory of evolution. Of course the scientific theory of evolution has no *telos*, that is what makes it so compelling. Seiwert gives a worthy parable of this criticism, arguing we could just as easily say the *telos* of evolution is *extinction*: "natural selection is basically a process of elimination" (229). Rue thus makes species survival a metaphysical *cause* of evolution rather than one operator in the mechanism that explains how species change over time.

For Seiwert, the lasting contribution of this work as a theory of religion is its emphasis on "the role of human emotions in human behavior," and its showing "that religions have a significant share in the cultural shaping of emotions" (235). Though Rue's text clearly blurs the line between studying religion and doing religion, I do not think we should dismiss it simply for that reason. If taken seriously, it presents a valuable point to scholars of religion, especially humanist

scholars, who might see their role and place in the world differently than scientists; that is, in some sense, as guardians of traditions, those who profess the word, voice criticism, and warn against things to come. Myth and theory have always been a bit blurry anyway.

Geertz's chapter tries to draw out a New Atheist theory of religion from Dawkins and Dennett. In complete contrast to the previous chapter on Rue, but similar in methodology, these scholars are not so much interested in a theory of religion, but in a rhetorical project, myth-making to some extent, in order to "disarm" religion (287). Geertz's primary criticism of the scholars is that they are rather ignorant about both religion and the study of religion, that they have bad attitudes that may ultimately be detrimental to their cause, and that they confuse (and equate) negative aspects of being human with negative aspects of religion. With regard to Dennett, he postulates a variety of compelling, empirically testable hypotheses about religion (248–249). For the most part he sees religion as a product of blind replication in the context of the constraints laid out by cognitive science of religion (Boyer, Guthrie, Barrett). Dennett agrees with the line first popularized by Diamond that religion gets rather domesticated in the context of the invention of agriculture and further divisions of labor that allow a steward class to develop. Post-domestication religion is thus "an alliance struck between government leaders and priests... to justify their kleptocracies" (249).

As far as Geertz is concerned, Dennett has a "methodological smugness" about the claims of the cognitive science of religion (251). Geertz asks "after some 150 years of experimental psychology," with a "smattering of brain scans here and fieldwork there — what can we confidently (let alone triumphantly) claim to have explained?" His answer is *not much*; the cognitive science of religion is thus "explanatory interpretation" (Jensen 2003:236)⁶ providing "good tools to think with" (251), but not something on which to base smug science.

Dawkins suggests three targets for the evolvability of religion: the group, another individual, and memes (or replicators) themselves. Geertz's main critique of Dawkins is his naive view of pre-modern religions, seeing them as somehow less intelligently designed than modern

⁶ Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003).

ones, such as Scientology (257). Ultimately Geertz does see a cognitive, evolutionary theory of religion possible, and sets out some steps towards it: research on the “cognition of fundamentalism... memory, suggestion, and false beliefs... techniques used in the mind control and socialization of children... the evolution of consciousness... theories of memory, the role of narrative, the development of persons and selves, embodied cognition, extended mind, the chemistry of ritual in general... and the development of language in general” (258).

Stausberg’s chapter is on Riesebrodt’s theory of religion. Riesebrodt attempts to lay out a general (Weberian) theory of religion that elaborates and systematizes the “insider” perspective rather than discounting it. He appears to take considerable issue with those scholars of religion who believe a definition of religion is either not possible, or not advisable, though from Stausberg’s summary it is not clear his argument would satisfy those scholars (265 and note 4). For Riesebrodt, religion is a legitimate category for scholars in the same way as music. A group of people need not have the *concept* of music for scholars to study their music. The same applies to religion (though Stausberg rightly points out in a note that non-Western concepts of music are actually quite distant from our own).

Riesebrodt suggests a number of insightful tools to study religion from this perspective. For example, he has his own helpful criticisms of many of the approaches here under review (267). He usefully distinguishes between four types of discourse on religion: Enlightenment, Romantic, secularization, and postmodern (265). His definition of religion is also theoretically productive. Religion is a response, or coping mechanism (though somehow not functional) in the face of human powerlessness; it is “an anthropology of deficiency”.

Religion is a complex of practices “based on the premise or existence of generally invisible personal or impersonal superhuman powers” (269). Ritual contact is established with these powers in four ways: for laypeople, primarily through interaction and manipulation, and for specialists primarily through fusion and self-empowerment. These “interventionist” rituals are central to his theory of religion, as they logically, emotionally, pragmatically, and systematically ground religious reality (271). He notes two other important practices that are grounded in interventionist practices: discursive and behavior regulating (theology and ethics).

Riesebrodt compares the liturgical structure of these rituals, systematizing them as structures of meaning, and ultimately claiming religion is “primarily a promise of salvation” (272). In this context Riesebrodt offers both a phylogenetic and ontogenetic theory of its emergence. He also distinguishes between religion, religiosity, and religious tradition, arguing that religiosity derives from religion and not the reverse (270). Religious tradition is the broadest category of the three, including broader “ways of life” and “traditional” elements.

Stausberg notes a number of rather serious problems with the approach. First, the theory is ambivalent in that its inductive and deductive methodologies appear to contradict. Riesebrodt wants his anti-functionalist cake and to eat it too. In his inductive mode he is quite critical of functionalism and promotes a Weberian meaning oriented approach to the explanation of religious action, while in his deductive mode he leans toward a functionalism of religious coping. Second, Riesebrodt does not sufficiently engage the literature on super-human agent concepts in the cognitive study of religion (277). This would give him some ground to explain the constraints on such concepts and how they distribute, and also help him relate such concepts to the structure of ritual. Third, Stausberg is skeptical that we should take “religious promises” at face value. He thinks this is rather like taking the advertising promises of modern corporations at face value (278). Fourth, he thinks the theory is too vague, relying on terms such as *Heil* and *Unheil* (in relation to salvation), that are no better than the blurry concepts of *mana*, the sacred, or the holy. Fifth, Stausberg thinks that, though grounded in meaningful data, the “proposed level of... abstraction makes the conclusions derived from the data look disappointingly shallow” (278). In other words, the bargain of taking the insider perspective as our starting point does not exactly pay off, because, in the end we are talking about our theories and not theirs. Thus, on my reading, we become stuck in a rather ‘powerless’ middle ground.

In the conclusion of the volume, Stausberg relates some useful ways to classify the relation between the chapters. The theories can be divided with regard to levels of explanation and their relation, units of explanation, degree of cross-cultural comparison, use of cognitive science, and the particular weighting of the relation between myth (or beliefs) and ritual (or practice).

More specifically, with regard to the content of the theories, he distinguishes between those theories that engage or are receptive to other theories of religion and those that are not. He also notes that the theorists have different ideas about what amounts to a theory. For example, McCauley and Lawson want a testable theory based on general principles, Riesebrodt relies on an “interpretive approach” (285), Stark is deductive, many scholars’ theories are based on evolutionary biology, and finally a few see theory as a form of metaphor making. Most of the theories regard religion as “natural” in some sense, even Dennett and Dawkins, who note that people are naturally “vulnerable” to religion. A further theoretical debate concerns whether religion is a byproduct or an adaptation (with most cognitive theories probably seeing it as a byproduct) and the adequacy of functionalist explanations of religion. In this regard the chapters seem rather equally divided between those that regard functionalism as a legitimate explanation and those that do not. Finally, the theories are further divided into those that are critical of religion and those that are apologies that explicitly try to promote new forms of religion (or atheism).