ABSTRACT: The study of religion has come a long way since the bad old days of bold, universalizing theory. The claim that religion can be readily recognized across time and place because it has a sort of ‘essence’ is today viewed as preposterous. What we would much rather insist on is the notion that religion as a category is shifting and complex, with vagueness kept at the center of our analyses. In this article, I play devil’s advocate by asking what (more) we can possibly gain by continuing to foreground religion’s conceptual shiftiness. Reflecting on this collection, I explore how a focus on genealogies and biographies might offer us new insight on the distinction between religiosity and religion. Defining religiosity as a species of attention that inheres in persons, I suggest that writing about and researching religion engages the religiosity of the author, and that religiosity, in turn, may (or may not) bring about definitions or assemblages we might recognize as ‘religion’.

KEYWORDS: category of religion, genealogies, religiosity, Simmel, theory

Debate on the concept of religion is an old and well-plowed field: we can see its furrows from afar, and the parameters rarely change. Regardless of our schools or positions, by now we are all familiar with the kinds of defense and critique the term generates. The call of this afterword is not to end that familiar conversation, or even to radically rethink religion’s critique or defense, but rather to find new pathways through an old field of debate. On the surface, this is a modest proposition. The daring part lies in the invitation to think about engagements from a personal perspective, to mine the biographical, to scrutinize events (slights, disagreements, accidents, data) that have shaped our own stories as scholars of religion. This invitation—to use the self to approach a familiar problem differently—is not unknown in academia, particularly within the field of anthropology where self-reflexivity has long existed both as method and as goal. But it has not been taken up as often as it could be or should be, particularly among scholars of religion. This is a shame, for as the editors of this collection suggest, doing so has the potential to provide new and unexpected angles on religion as an object of study and as a heuristic category.

The articles in this Symposium take up this call in an admirable way. They trace conceptual genealogies in their “epistemological, tactical, and personal dimensions” (Bandak and Stjernholm, this volume) and show the importance of these dimensions for how we live with and work on religious phenomena. Several of the contributions cover classical ground in the process,
presenting well-honed defenses and critiques of religion as a category. For example, where Robertson takes the critical deconstructivist route with the argument that concepts and categories wield too much power over us, Trolle chooses a more constructive path, offering not so much a defense of categories per se, but a balanced argument about what different methodologies in the study of religion might (or might not) achieve. Scheer's article falls somewhere in the middle of that critical-reflexive spectrum. Going for excavation rather than denouncement, it unpacks the different meanings that the term 'religion' has for different groups, urging us toward awareness rather than suspicion.

Despite their varying tones and strategies, all of the contributions assume the conceptual flexibility of the category with a certain confidence and level of dexterity. Bandak and Stjernholm set the stage by reiterating the point that the business of religion will “by no means be settled.” As a category it is 'vague', as a concept it is 'transient', and as an object of debate it is a 'moving target'. But all this uncertainty “produces an interesting field for present and future conversations” on this subject matter. Challenged by vagueness, we should strive, it would seem, “toward better, clearer, and more concise ideas,” knowing full well that they are “never going to be complete or exhaustive.” What is striking is how widely shared this intellectual strategy has become, how seemingly ready we are to agree to disagree. Such a strategy may serve to keep the interdisciplinary conversation moving forward for the time being, but the concept has been something of an intellectual predicament for a good while now. When reading this group of articles, I could not help but wonder if there is something very contemporary about the way we have learned to accept that predicament and become comfortable with uncertainty.

The bold universalistic theories of religion may not have disappeared entirely, as Bandak and Stjernholm acknowledge, but it is unlikely that any “will sweep the board and establish a new ‘truth regime.’” When it comes to defining religion, therefore, it is tempting to conclude that vagueness (and the comfort with uncertainty it implies) has become mainstream, and boldness (and the discomfort with uncertainty it implies) the marginal form. This is not necessarily a criticism of the mainstream position (to which I also belong) for there is much to recommend it. By evading definitions of religion altogether, or foregrounding the imperfect and provisional quality of any concept we use, we convey a certain sort of humility and generosity toward others; we perform a cautious, liberal-minded, and respectful form of scholarship. The danger, perhaps, is that we also become a little ungrounded; theoretically ‘agnostic’, we float off into the ether.

Perhaps we could pay less attention to knowledge of religion per se, and more to its tones and forms. If the content of that knowledge (its substantive claims) collects and divides into centers and peripheries, the forms it takes add lightness or density. Knowledge, thus, is more than claims; it is claims that are variously weighted, with boldness or vagueness, optimism or negativity. We might reflect upon the different kinds of work this weighting does—on the heaviness of boldness and its grounded, sure-footed qualities, or the lightness of vagueness and its airy sense of potentiality. If vagueness appears to be on the ascendancy, perhaps it is not vagueness as such that we value, but the democratic weightlessness of its form.

All this begs the question about the future of bold universalizing theory. Will it survive or is it destined to become extinct? Taking the study of religion as an entire field of discourse, I cannot help but wonder whether boldness needs to be understood not in terms of its rightness or wrongness but as a necessary ballast for weightlessness—a form that, for all its assumptions (and perhaps arrogance), has been and could continue to be immensely generative. Without that ballast, vagueness becomes wispy and unproductive; we become so uniform in our commitment to the notion of never reaching any sort of agreement that we risk losing the impetus to try. A question we might then ask is, how do we keep weighted? How can we keep speculative, universalizing concepts circulating among ourselves in productive, thought-provoking ways?
I find inspiration in the editors’ call to examine our scholarly and biographical trajectories (or genealogies), and two of the articles take up this possibility in exemplary ways. As Kaell’s fascinating and exuberant ramble through her career shows, the category of religion reveals itself to be a surprising object of passion and a continually evolving concern. Tacking between conversations (real and imagined) with scholars in her guild, research participants, and friendly inquirers to whom she must explain what it is she does, Kaell focuses in on those aha moments and “helpful confusions” that have served to form her, methodologically and theoretically. The claim that follows is light and dexterous: religion is a “shifting” thing, but also, it could be argued, an ever-expanding thing. A conceptual hot air balloon that in Kaell’s case has expanded outward and upward over the years, from a neat definitional focus on “everyday relations between humans and other-than-human presences” to one that includes bureaucracy, power relations, the secular, and even weather patterns.

For Johansen, on the other hand, it is the nature (or category) of the secular that is at stake, and which is rendered up via the “emotional,” “relational,” and “bodily” work of being a scholar. In this honest and elegant article, Johansen shows us the “flammable” nature of the secular body in contemporary Denmark, how it suddenly ignites in moments of awkwardness and communicative failure, to become something tangible and graspable. “The secular seems difficult to grasp,” she states in her opening paragraph, before going on to show us how rare and in fact difficult this business of ‘getting a grip’ has become. Johansen does not deny the ethereal and slippery nature of the secular; she simply shows that it sometimes has a solidity to it that cannot be ignored.

There is a courageousness about these introspectively toned contributions that I find inspiring, as a new way into an aging discourse. By reflecting on our trajectories—personally, viscerally—we confront ourselves as theory makers, recognizing what J. Lorand Matory (2018: 36) calls the “material conditions of theory.” In short, we remind ourselves that the writing we read “after the fact” as abstract theory, emerges not from timeless truth but from “cultural conventions, material conditions, biographical circumstances, and political rivalries” (ibid.). Such examinations may move us, once again, to take refuge in the weightlessness of diversity, in agreeing to disagree, for surely if the material and biographical details of our lives as scholars are different, so too will be our understandings. But perhaps we could bring some ballast to this claim. Biographical introspections may not bring us any closer to agreeing on the substantive definition of religion as a category, but they can teach us much about our common religiosity, by which I mean the quality of attention a scholar must possess to participate in such debates.

What is religiosity? Is it a sense perception, a predisposition toward certain words, forces, rituals, or entities, or does it prefigure all empirical evidence? Simmel (1997) speculated that religiosity was independent—and infinitely detachable—from religion as a semantic category and diverse historical-material phenomenon. He argued that while society (and the individual) could do without religion, it could not do without religiosity itself. Simmel’s thoughts on religion follow a Hegelian style of thinking in which a distinction is posited between that which is shared, affective, and a priori and that which concretizes and condenses into an always particularized form. Religiosity, in this sense, is an a priori existential or subjective dynamic, “a feeling of being, energy, and direction that cannot be specified more clearly” (ibid.: 24). It is “a way of the soul to live and experience the world … one of the deep forms of movement of the soul” (Simmel, cited in Laermans 2006: 482). Religiosity is to religion as thirst is to moisture or hunger is to fuel.

Such a model is hardly fashionable by today’s weightless style of reasoning. It is generalizing and loaded with the unexamined contours of Simmel’s own Protestant European background. Looked at in the context of Simmel’s overall writings, it also has racist undertones, for Simmel...
was no exception among nineteenth-century philosophers in positing Christianity as some sort of evolutionary endpoint, a cultural formation that had managed to achieve a level of completeness that more ‘primitive’ religions could only aim toward. But even were we, for the sake of argument, to extract Simmel’s core distinction from these evident drawbacks, there remains the question of why we should accept such a speculative distinction. If we can only read religiosity backwards from instances of religion, how can we know it actually exists? And if it does, does it really exist in an energetic a priori sense that is detachable from discourses and symbols of power and authority in the Foucauldian/Asadian sense?

Taking a speculative realist perspective, it could be argued that there is nothing necessarily unreal or less real about objects that are thought or imagined to exist. As all concepts have a speculative component to them, religiosity is no more problematic than religion in this regard. But on a more pragmatic level, it could be said that the abstract and universal concept of religiosity is, at an important level, the very opposite of what we evidentially know, which is merely the unresolvable diversity of historical-material conditions. This is no reason to reject it; indeed, it is precisely why we should embrace it. If we insist too stringently on empirical evidence, we become trapped by the specificity of our data and cannot find affinities with people who work in different areas. One of the great properties of the speculative is, as Jon Bialecki (2022: 154) reminds us, “an internal multiplicity” that, unlike fully concretized religious apparatuses, “needs no infrastructure before it is realized as a concerted project.” Needing no infrastructure, and therefore unrestrained by it, the speculative can be viewed as an essentially shared space in which affinities (as well as differences) are always already present and possible. A speculatively universal concept like religiosity can therefore bring density and cohesion to a discourse, preventing us from becoming so conceptually weightless that we end up floating away.

What then, we might again ask, is religiosity, and how does it affect our engagements as scholars? Several of the authors in this collection utilize the term, but none pauses to unpack its potential. Simmel connects religiosity to individuals through the use of the word ‘soul’, but perhaps we might better describe it as a human capacity always present—if in differing intensities—that alerts us to the precariousness of life and death, and orients us toward life’s ultimate sources and/or meanings. We might class it as an orientation or attunement to thresholds where questions about extra-human forces and the fundamental nature of our existence emerge. Or as a quality of attentiveness to life and death puzzles, and to matters that transcend us. Religiosity exists in and between people, in and between humans and their environments. It sits poised somewhere between the virtual and the actual, thickening up and thinning out again in typical and unexpected patterns. Gaining traction through institutions and practices, it may (or may not) become something we would recognize as ‘religion’, something that grips us in pleasant or unpleasant ways.

As Bandak and Stjernholm contend, “we stand to learn a great deal from exploring what exactly is engaging us—and how we engage—in the study of religion.” Here I have explored how a focus on genealogies and biographies could offer us new insights on the distinction between religiosity and religion, and on the concept of religiosity as a species of attention. In other words, I have suggested that writing about and researching religion engages the religiosity of the author, and religiosity in turn brings about recognition of and definitions of religion. This may seem like a tautological play on words, and to some it may even seem too redolent of an unwholesome power play (who recognizes, who defines?). But religiosity is not, in essence, a power exercise or form of practice that can set or contest the boundaries of meaning. It is a capacity for attention, a dynamic energy that can be endlessly fixed and retraced. It is in this simple way that we might recognize, without the need for splitting hairs, that humans have religiosity, and that religiosity can motivate our engagement with any kind of empirical data.
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