

Social Constructionism vs. What?¹

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Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective with great potential usefulness for the study of religion. However, because the theory is often assumed rather than developed, and because it is often reduced to its extreme versions, its value has been occluded even as talk of ‘constructs’ has proliferated. Constructionism has been portrayed as the other of religion’s two realisms: theological and phenomenological. It has been cast in the role of a conveniently elided counter-position by the theoretical discourses, research practices, and institutional formations of scholars of religion. What this paper attempts to show is that constructionist work in the study of religion, by failing to clarify its theoretical basis adequately, and by too often accepting the role of antagonist to realism, has itself played a key role in this misleading and detrimental characterization.

The paper has three sections. The first two sections present a brief sketch of the development and key characteristics of social constructionism, illustrating something of its breadth and variety. In the third section, a consideration of constructionism in religious studies publications demonstrates the need to clarify three key issues. First, constructionist approaches are not necessarily anti-realist and so can be consistent with critical theological or *sui generis* perspectives. Second, the overwhelming lack of explicitly developed theory has obscured and obstructed the usefulness of social constructionism in religious studies. Third, the relation between constructionism and other theoretical positions needs to be clarified. The lack

¹ I am indebted to Robin Downey for recommending a number of relevant works in the field of science studies. I will use the term ‘constructionism’ though ‘constructivism’ is often used interchangeably with it (e.g., Raphael 1994; Fuller 1994; 1998; Lynch 1998). This choice is motivated by the latter term’s reference to other theories. ‘Constructivism’ refers to a position in the philosophy of mathematics, a version of intuitionism that argues that “mathematical objects do not exist until they have been built up by proofs of their existence” (Ernest 1998; cf. Hacking 1999, 46). ‘Constructivism’ also refers to a position in cognitive psychology associated with the work of Jean Piaget, holding that individuals do not receive knowledge passively but rather fashion it metacognitively or unconsciously (Hruby 2001, 48). ‘Constructivism,’ of course, is also the name of a tradition of Soviet and European art, including such figures as Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus group. In another vein, philosopher Nelson Goodman calls his project “constructionalism,” drawing on Russell, Carnap and Quine and emphasizes logical (rather than social) “worldmaking” (Goodman 1978; Aagaard-Mogensen *et al.* 1987; cf. Hacking 1999, 44).

of due attention to theory has obscured the status and claims of constructionism. This theoretical perspective is not necessarily reductionist or radically relativist; and it is not simply the opposite of realist or *sui generis* approaches to religion. Constructionism has much to offer as an approach to understanding how historically and culturally contingent religious phenomena arise from the raw materials of our physical and social worlds.

Genealogies of Social Constructionism

Kant is generally the first major figure cited as a forebear of social constructionism, due to his critique of basic categories of knowledge (O'Neill 1989; Hacking 1997, 87; 1998, 55; Smith 2001, 159). Ian Hacking calls him “the great pioneer of construction” (1999, 41). More broadly, psychologist Kenneth Gergen notes that

Philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, and various phenomenologists have tended to adopt an *endogenic perspective* regarding the origins of knowledge. In this case, knowledge depends on processes (sometimes viewed as innate) endemic to the organism. Humans harbor inherent tendencies, it is said, to think, categorize, or process information, and it is these tendencies (rather than features of the world in itself) that are of paramount importance in fashioning knowledge. (Gergen 1985, 269; italics in original)

Social constructionist theory draws on several of the main streams of sociological theory. One reviewer goes so far as to suggest that “the entire field of sociology has been a social constructionist one for most of the twentieth century” (Maines 2000, 577). Various precursors of social constructionism are frequently cited, including primarily the following:

- Marx’s concepts of reification and fetishism (Berger and Pullberg 1965; Latour and Woolgar 1986, 179, 259n10; Turner 1991; 1994, 110);
- Karl Mannheim’s project of ‘unmasking’ the social functions of knowledge (Turner 1991; Velody 1994, 81; Hacking 1999, 53-54; Northcott 1999, 205);
- The Frankfurt school’s radical critique of the historical and ideological contingency of western Reason (Gergen 1998, 36);

- Russell's, Carnap's, and Quine's theories of logical construction, especially as developed in Nelson Goodman's theory of 'worldmaking' (Hacking 1998, 52; 1999, 44-45, 128-32; Goodman 1978; Aagaard-Mogensen *et al.* 1987);
- Mead's relational view of the generalized other (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 17);
- The influential legacy stretching from Weber's *verstehen*, through Schutz's life-world, to the ethnomethodology of Goffman and Garfinkle (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 16-17; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993, 27-28).

Schutz, for example, extended Weber's methodological insights to an exploration of symbolically prestructured reality:

The social world . . . has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought objects which determine their behavior, define the goals of their action, the means available for attaining them. (cited in Habermas 1984, 121)

One of Schutz' students, Peter Berger, played a key role in the development of social constructionism, coauthoring, with Thomas Luckman, the single most influential single work in the area: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966).²

The above genealogy is descriptive, listing commonly cited precedents. Conventional histories of theoretical perspectives emphasize such individual contributions and key advances. Michael Lynch points out that a constructionist genealogy of social constructionism would look very different (1998). On the one hand, this might involve drawing on alternative voices. For scholars of religion, two resources that, to my knowledge, are never cited as

² Two years before the seminal book that he wrote with Thomas Luckmann appeared (1966), Peter Berger co-authored a paper arguing that marriage is a model of the process by which "the socially constructed world" is "sustained through conversation with significant others" (Berger and Kellner 1993 [1964], 246-47). One year before *The Social Construction of Reality*, he co-authored another paper arguing that the Marxist concept of reification is central to understanding "the human enterprise of producing a world . . . as . . . a social process. . . . The reality of such a world is given neither in itself nor once and for all. It must be constructed and re-constructed over and over again" (Berger and Pullberg 1965, 201). In addition, two works in science studies have played key roles in the growth of social constructionism: Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life: The [Social] Construction of Scientific Facts* (1986 [1979]). The word "social" was dropped from the title of the second addition of Latour and Woolgar due to its perceived redundancy.

precedents have much to offer. Recent work on Schleiermacher, especially correctives to views that his work on hermeneutics is rooted in intuition, suggests that he has much to add to a Kantian perspective. Schleiermacher attempted to ground truth in a dialectical relation between spontaneity and receptivity, holding that “true concepts do not pre-exist in a ‘Platonic’ manner; they are, rather, the normatively constituted aim of the activity of thought in a community” (Bowie 1998, xxii). Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, reclaimed from Dilthey’s distorting legacy, offers resources for a dynamic tension between realism and constructionism. Another untapped resource is Burkart Holzner’s *Reality Construction in Society* (1972 [1968]), published shortly after Berger and Luckmann’s classic (1966) and Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). Where Berger and Luckmann place almost exclusive emphasis on the mediating function of social roles in a given society, Holzner adds a nuanced analysis of the differential construction of knowledge in complex social systems. Where Berger and Luckmann have been criticized for an exclusive emphasis on the dominant group in a society (cf. Valantasis 1995, 811), Holzner’s approach is more flexible.

On the other hand, adding to the list of individual contributors does not move far enough beyond “heroic genealogies” (Lynch 1998, 15, 21). A constructionist genealogy of constructionism in religious studies might emphasize ways in which different scholars and groups of scholars have used the concept of ‘construction’ strategically within formative theoretical and metatheoretical debates within their field(s). So, for example, the place of ‘construction’ in the religious studies vs. theology debates is different than its place in recent discussions of *sui generis* discourses of religion. This paper will not tackle this large and complex canvas but will attempt a preliminary sketch of the current status of social constructionism in religious studies.

An Overview of Social Constructionism

It is helpful to characterize social constructionism in two ways, internally, in terms of defining characteristics, and externally, with reference to the views that it generally opposes.

In internal terms, a defining family of characteristics of social constructionism would include the following (Burr 1995):

1. Reflexive and contextualized critique of conceptual categories
2. Analysis of historical and cultural specificity
3. A dynamic view of mutual influences between knowledge and social processes or patterns of social action
4. A theoretical focus on language and a methodological use of discourse analysis

Breaking these characteristics down more specifically, Social constructionist perspectives generally take at least some of the following stances (Burr 1995):

- Anti-essentialism
- Anti-realism
- An emphasis on historical and cultural specificity of knowledge
- An emphasis on language as a pre-condition of thought
- An emphasis on language as a form of social action
- A focus on interaction and social practices
- A focus on processes (not simply products)

In general, then, social constructionism generally involves an emphasis on context-bound aspects of objects and ideas. Specifically, social constructionist views emphasize the historically developed culture-specific nature of the objects of specific fields of study, and they place central importance on the role of discourse in ‘constructing’ these objects and ideas as historically and culturally contingent.

Given this general emphasis on contextualization, the word ‘social’ in ‘social constructionism’ is arguably redundant (Latour and Woolgar 1986, 281; Hacking 1998, 49-52). Constructionism is fundamentally a theoretical perspective that analyzes the constitution of specific phenomena from raw materials of a different type or order. It focuses on discursive and social processes of construction. Use of the word ‘social,’ then, should properly be

limited to cases where attention is directed to the constructive role of specific social processes. In what follows, I will use the more general term, ‘constructionism,’ except where referring to work that warrants using the specific term.

Ian Hacking provides another useful characterization of constructionisms. He distinguishes “six grades of constructionism” along a spectrum from mild to radical (1999, 19ff.).

1. The *Historical* approach claims that X is a contingent result of historical events, prioritizes historical methods, and is neutral with respect to the normative evaluation of X.
2. The *Ironic* approach takes an ironic attitude to X, arguing that what is generally thought to be inevitable could have been otherwise. This view also tends to take a negative but resigned normative stance with regard to X.
3. The *Reformist* approach takes a negative view of X and seeks to facilitate modifying some aspects of X by drawing attention to its contingency.
4. The *Unmasking* approach seeks to undermine X by exposing the ideological or socially interested function that it serves. It takes a negative view of X but is largely an intellectual exercise.
5. The *Rebellious* approach goes further, arguing that we would be better off without X.
6. The *Revolutionary* approach goes still further, attempting to do away with X.

Hacking’s spectrum reminds us that, in addition to analyzing modes of contingency, constructionist views also range from descriptive to normative, from potentially conservative (explaining how objects and ideas are maintained through discursive and social processes) to actively subversive (using the assertion of contingency as a springboard for change).³

³ In management studies, for example, Berger and Luckmann’s classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*, is claimed as a forebear by both sides of a fundamental theoretical divide: the old institutional paradigm emphasizes the conservative dimension of social constructionism, analyzing how rules become institutionalized and taken for granted; the new

In external terms, constructionist perspectives generally stand sharply opposed to realist, essentialist, naturalist, or physicalist perspectives. The clearest and most influential example is the field of science studies, where radical constructionist claims stand opposed to the realist view that scientific method generates objectively true knowledge about the world. Positions range from the naïve realist view that the objects of science are real and correspond simply with theoretical concepts to the extreme constructionist view that they are no more than artifacts of historically and culturally specific beliefs and practices. For example, subatomic particles like quarks are, in fact, ‘observable’ only indirectly using complex experimental apparatuses whose design embodies specific theories. For most scientists, such experiments attest to the objective reality of quarks. Many scholars in the field of science studies underline the social processes that shape the selection (elaboration and survival) of theories and experimental techniques; they argue that these mediating processes result in objects and theories that are not purely objective, i.e., that could have been fundamentally otherwise or that are nominalist artefacts whose stability as ‘true’ accounts is due to regularities in socially-situated discourses and not due to correspondence with objective reality (Pickering 1994; Bloor and Barnes 1996; cf. Hacking 1999, 63ff.).

The place of constructionism in science studies can seem relatively simple. It is often portrayed as the other of realism. This characterization is justified, in part, by the occasional extreme claim. For example, constructionist scholar Robert Markey, in a paper called “The Irrelevance of Reality,” claims that

Within a dialogically agitated environment, debates about reality become, in practical terms, irrelevant. “Reality,” finally, is a historical construct. We can thump our hands on tables and exclaim, “This is real!”, just as we can thump our hands to our chests and assert, “I think, therefore I am.” But these gestures are not indicative of any ultimate truths; they are historically bounded strategies of affirmation. . . . (Markley 1992, 270).⁴

institutional paradigm emphasizes the dynamic dimension, analyzing how rules are contested and reformed (Hirsch and Boal 2000).

⁴ This is one of the passages skewered by Alan D. Sokal in his infamous *Social Text* parody (Sokal 1996a, 238n.39; cf. 1996b)

In reaction to such extreme statements, we find equally odd affirmations of realist perspectives such as the following by the *gonfleur terrible* of the ‘Science Wars,’ Alan D. Sokal: “To say that ‘physical reality is a social and linguistic construct’ is just plain silly, but to say that ‘social reality is a social and linguistic construct’ is virtually a tautology” (1996c, 98n.4).

This mutual miscomprehension is fostered by one-sided characterizations of constructionism. Constructionist views of science rarely go so far as to deny the existence of objective reality. Instead they focus on a range of more interesting issues such as the following:

- Relations between scientific and technological developments and their economic, political, and cultural contexts (Bernal 1965);
- Contingencies introduced by power struggles in research projects (Collins and Pinch 1993);
- The impact of government funding priorities on directions of research (Hacking 1999, 163-85);
- The impact of corporate research priorities on scientific practices (Aronowitz 1996, 187);
- Elements of nominalism introduced when the complexity and expense of replicating research leads scientists to ‘agree to agree’ based on data that is still open to question (Latour and Woolgar 1986);
- The ways in which science shapes and is shaped by ideologies of gender and race (Harding 1993; 1998; Keller and Longino 1996);
- Democratic and environmental implications of different conceptions of scientific literacy (Barad 2000);
- Ideological implications of the association between science and western economic domination (Margolin and Margolin 1990);
- The impact of transnational science on local views of culture, science, and technology (Fujimura 2000);
- The ideological impact of materialist and reductionist perspectives on women and the poor of the third world (Shiva 1993);
- And, paradoxically but importantly, the repressive implications of the recent convergence between social constructivist views of science and religious fundamentalism (Nanda 1998; 2000).

None of these directions of research in science studies necessitate an extreme constructionism that would deny the reality of the material world. More to the point, scholars of religion will recognize the relevance of similar issues to their own field. A broad spectrum of such issues is largely independent of the realism/relativism debate.

Constructionism plays a similar role as the contextualized other of naïve realism in a number of other social scientific debates. For example, psychologists and anthropologists have debated whether people of different cultures share a universal and objective range of color perception, emotional experience, and conceptions of the ‘self.’⁵ The verdict on colors tends to realism (Kaiser and Boynton 1996, 499); the verdict on the ‘self’ tends to constructionism (Kusserow 1999); the debate on emotion continues (Hinton 1999).

Constructionism also plays an important role in the study of phenomena with more obvious social aspects. For example, in technology studies, social constructionist perspectives question the view that technological artefacts take pre-determined forms in response to specific human needs (Pinch and Bijker 1987; Bijker 1995b). For example, Wiebe Bijker argues that technologies stabilize in specific forms through processes of negotiation between a variety of social actors, representing the ideas and interests of science, industry, government, the public, etc. (Bijker 1995a). Andrew Feenberg argues that ideology shapes this process: the interests of elites are naturalized in views that technological developments are inevitable and a sign of ‘progress’ (1991; 1995). Again, constructionism stands sharply opposed to a naturalistic view. Debate takes place largely along this one axis.

Constructionism can temper naïve realist or naturalist views in more than one way. Ian Hacking points to three “sticking points” in terms of which constructionist views take stances that can be contrasted with naïve realism (1999, 33). The first sticking point is the issue of *contingency*.

Constructionism is most recognizable by its fundamental assertion that

⁵ On colors see Berlin and Kay 1969, Hilbert 1987, Hardin and Maffi 1997. On emotions see Harré 1986, Lutz 1986, Lynch 1990. On the ‘self’ see Baumeister 1987, Sampson 1988, Markus and Kitayama 1991.

objects and ideas might have been otherwise than they are. Where realism posits external constraints that prevent contingent modifications in the face of historical or cultural factors, constructionist views emphasize exactly this sort of contingency. The second sticking point is the issue of *nominalism*. Where realism posits that the referential function of language is rooted in a correspondence between sign and world, constructionism erodes this view to a greater or lesser extent. At its most relativistic, constructionist views hold that language refers to nothing beyond its own web of circulating signs: language refers not to ontologically real objects in an independent world but to other elements in a universe whose reality is entirely discursive and dependent. The third sticking point regards the issue of the *stability* of representations and theoretical perspectives. The realist account is that representations and theories are stable if and only if they correspond to an independent reality. In contrast to this, constructionist views emphasize social and discursive factors in attempting to explain why some representations and theories are less transient than others.

In sum, constructionisms vary in several ways: according to the types of objects or ideas analyzed as constructs; by scope and degree of relativism; along a spectrum from descriptive through normative to activist; and by a theoretical focus on contingency, nominalism, or stability. To facilitate our considering the place of constructionism in religious studies, it is important to note that it is often portrayed as anti-realist. Defining constructionism as the other of realism serves strategic purposes by marginalizing it, making it easier to dismiss by reducing it to its most radical forms. Insofar as discursive processes of definition, analysis, comparison, and classification frame this theoretical perspective in a manner that serves the interests of specific social groups, e.g., certain scholars of religion, we would be entitled to speak of the construction of constructionism.

Constructionism in Religious Studies

The place of constructionism in religious studies is especially complex because the tension with naïve realism is only one of several theoretical axes that frame theories of religion. This section of the paper offers a brief overview

of a range of appeals to constructionism in religious studies and then clarifies its place in relation to other theoretical axes in the field. In the end, I argue that constructionism is useful only if it is clearly defined and distinguished from other approaches. However, this is seldom the case in religious studies. Publications in the field of religious studies use ‘construction’ and related terms in a wide variety of ways. As a result, our first task should be one of clarification. The remainder of this section attempts to clarify three key issues, arguing the following claims:

1. Constructionism is not necessarily anti-realist;
2. The lack of explicitly developed theory has hampered constructionist work in religious studies; and
3. The relation between constructionism and other theoretical axes in the study of religion is less oppositional and more nuanced than is generally credited.

Beyond Anti-realism. Constructionist views can be but are not necessarily anti-realist. Recalling the variety of questions asked by constructionist approaches in science studies noted above, we must keep in mind that atheists, agnostics, and people of faith can all agree that scriptural interpretations, mystical experiences, ritual gestures, religious architecture, and symbolic representations have dimensions of cultural and historical contingency. They are, to this minimal extent at least, constructed differently according to context. The use of the term construction merely flags the need to clarify the discursive and social processes that lead to such variation.

The claim that religious phenomena are *nothing but constructions* is a separate and qualitatively distinct claim. So, for example, it is a straw doll argument to claim that the “weakness of social constructionism as an epistemology lies in the fact that one can agree with the bare premise that knowledge is a construct, but disagree with the conclusion that objectivity is impossible . . .” (Bauerlein 2001, 229). It is easy to argue against extreme versions of radical relativist constructionism, but this begs the more general question of the perspective’s usefulness.

The situation is rendered more complex in religious studies by the presence of two competing versions of realism: specific theological traditions and general phenomenological perspectives. Evangelical views of grace and Eliadian views of the sacred can both be framed in a way that emphasizes universality and realism over against the alleged radical relativism of constructionism. In this way theological and crypto-theological views can construct a common enemy. But this is misleading. Theology and phenomenology can both benefit from techniques for taking account of at least some elements of historical and cultural contingency.⁶

Theological appeals to constructionism underline the need to distinguish constructionism from anti-realism. Recent work argues that paradigms of biblical criticism construct various models and strategies of reading and even readers themselves (Segovia 1995). Other work argues that a social constructionist approach to the Church complements traditional ecclesiological views by drawing attention to “the proper analysis of priesthood as lived social experience” (Yates 1998, 19). Other work underlines the importance of Christian fellowship by arguing that faith is a social construction: in this light, a “sociological perspective can serve a prophetic role in the church” (Leming, 1989, 167).

In one sense, constructionism is the bread and butter of religious studies. Extreme relativist views notwithstanding, the *contextualization of the sacred* is a definitive characteristic of the field. The majority of scholars of religion would surely admit that religious phenomena exhibit at least some degree of historical and cultural contingency. Constructionism simply highlights the value of exploring the processes through which these contingencies emerge.

An example will illustrate this point. The liturgical and iconographic distinctiveness of the Uniate churches within Roman Catholicism reflects a complex set of historical, cultural, institutional, theological and doctrinal

⁶ For example, Michel Despland points out that the influence of Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* was shaped by historical, cultural and linguistic factors, as seen in its very different reception among French scholars of religion (1991). For an exceptional contextualization of nineteenth-century French theological thought see Despland 1998.

developments.⁷ A historian of Orthodoxy and a historian of the Vatican would tell very different stories, and these would differ even more from liturgical or art historical accounts. But why would anyone wish to import the concept of ‘construction’ into such an issue? It would make little sense to use this example as fodder for an anti-realist argument, to argue that the language of Roman Catholic ecclesiology does not refer to the presence of the Spirit in the Church and world, but that we find here only manifestations of a discourse that circulates self-referentially within a set of institutional power relations. This would be the equivalent of finger-exercises on a post-modern keyboard. Such a claim would beg the key question that the concept of construction evokes: precisely how do linguistic and social factors contribute to the emergence of contingency in religious phenomena? Whether a particular scholar sees such factors as sufficient explanations or as modes of God’s *energeias* working in the world is a secondary issue.

So, for example, a constructionist approach to the issue of Uniatism might examine the discursive and institutional mechanisms through which the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand acknowledges “the complexity of the Oriental Churches, with respect to their geographico-cultural and social conditions” and, on the other hand, holds that it is itself the unique body of Christ and sole path to salvation (“Congrégation” n.d.). Such an approach could compare different discursive formulations of ‘Uniatism,’ ‘Orthodoxy,’ and ‘Catholicism’ across the spectrum of positions regarding recent ecumenical developments. It would also situate these discursive moves in their institutional contexts. For example, certain uses of ‘Uniatism’ in the 1993 Balamand Agreement, produced through Catholic/Orthodox consultation, embody a wide range of factors. The document frames the Orthodox claim to be the sole path of salvation as a historical *response* to Uniatism. This portrays Uniatism as a mechanism of Catholic mission. This view of Uniatism marks a trajectory of institutionally situated framings by effectively granting priority to Catholic claims. The response of members of the Orthodox Sacred Community of Mount Athos is to call this position an example of “totalitarian ecclesiology”

⁷ The Uniate churches are former Orthodox churches that retain liturgical, theological, iconographic, and institutional characteristics of Orthodoxy while acknowledging the appropriately qualified authority of the Pope and the Magisterium.

(“Letter” n.d.). Extending this textual reading in the direction of constructionism would require a more rigorous application of discourse analysis and an appropriately theorized account of the relevant social formations and processes.

The meaning of the term “Uniatism” clearly reflects a variety of factors, and unpacking this constellation would draw our attention to a specific range of raw materials used in different conceptions of this social object and the ideas that describe it. A constructionist approach begins by noting the historical, cultural, and institutional locations and contingencies of such discursive formulations; it proceeds by rigorous diachronic analysis of relations between these factors; and it ends by going beyond a simplistic assertion that context is important in order to draw conclusions regarding specific processes of construction. In this particular case, the metaphor of ‘construction’ draws our attention to a fairly obvious claim: understanding talk of ‘Uniatism’ seems inseparable from the analysis of strategies that are historically and culturally situated as well as ideologically and institutionally motivated. The story of Uniatism is more complete with the inclusion of these elements. But this does not imply that the phenomenon consists of nothing but these elements.

Clarifying *the extent to which* and *the processes by which* contingent formations are produced allows us to reflect back on the theoretical premises of constructionism, arriving at a clearer sense of what raw materials are used and how they are put together. Asking questions about ways that economic, political, and other forces shape religious phenomena reveal important dimensions of contingency (hence ‘construction’) regardless of one’s stance with respect to ultimate ontological claims. To be more precise, despite the highly visible conflict between the extremes of the spectrum—theological realism and radical relativism—an entire gamut of interesting and productive debates fill out the middle ground. Constructionism can affirm, deny, or bracket the ontological status of raw materials and still fruitfully study the processes through which religious phenomena take shape.

As is the case with science studies, constructionist approaches in religious studies are not necessarily anti-realist. They point to elements of contingency in religious phenomena and degrees of underdetermination in the

language that describes them. They interrogate ways in which the interests of specific social groups are masked by purportedly objective claims.

Constructionism in religious studies is not necessarily atheistic or even agnostic with respect to the ontological claims of specific theological traditions or of general phenomenological perspectives. As a minimum, however, constructionism begins by noting that there is more to religion than a set of invariant objects and ideas floating free of any context.

Jonathan Z. Smith is sometimes interpreted as providing a warrant for an extreme relativist view of constructionism. In a famous passage from the introduction to *Imagining Religion*, he says

there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy" (J.Z. Smith 1982, xi, italics in original; cf. 1998, 281-82).

However, Smith's thoughtful and nuanced work is anything but one sided. The definitive tension at the heart of constructionism is implicit in a statement by Smith in his influential essay, "Map Is Not Territory":

"In the West, we live in a post-Kantian world in which man is defined as a world-creating being and culture is understood as a symbolic process of world-construction. . . . What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to live." (J.Z. Smith 1978, 290)

Smith's astute denial that scholarly categories correspond perfectly to equivalent real phenomena is not a denial of the existence of correlated phenomena or the possibility of knowledge of them. Making sense of the worlds is an active, constructive process, but this does not deny the existence of facts. Smith notes that it "is only theories and concepts that convert facts into data, that render them significance as examples of larger intellectual issues which comprise the agenda, debated though it may be, of a field" (J.Z. Smith 1995, 413). Smith states repeatedly that 'religion' is, like 'language' in linguistics, a second-order concept (1988, 235; 1998, 281-82). This is not to

deny that people speak, but simply to assert that we must not fail to consider the extent to which we construct what we study through the very act of studying it. Constructionism does not provide a warrant for an escape into postmodern play. On the contrary, recognizing that scholars construct their object and categories of study, to whatever extent, forces us to take responsibility for our creations/constructions (J.Z. Smith 1988, 235). Reconsidering constructionism more attentively promises to highlight this agenda of the field.

Taking the metaphor of construction seriously forces us to confront the question of raw materials. As Ian Hacking says,

Anything worth calling a construction was or is constructed in quite definite stages, where the later stages are built upon, or of, the product of earlier stages. Anything worth calling a construction has a history. But not just any history. It has to be a history of building. (1998, 56; cf. 1999, 49)

Too often, constructionist work uses a relativist punch line as a substitute for the story of construction.

The status of the raw materials is a central issue in constructionism. Acknowledging the power that scholars wield to shape their objects of study through analysis, comparison, classification, and generalization does not imply that religious phenomena are *nothing but* constructions. As Gustavo Benavides notes, this recognition forces us to address

the problem of the relationship between constructs and raw materials. . . [A]lthough one can manufacture all sorts of things using all kinds of raw materials, certain raw materials lend themselves to fashioning certain objects whereas other raw materials do not. (Benavides 2000, 116; cf. 1997, 130; 2001, 107)

The fact that this point is both obvious and polemical in the study of religion suggests that the field harbours certain biases or blind spots, a point we will return to below.

In sum, constructionism is not the other of realism. It offers the possibility of more responsible and responsive theories of religion. The recognition and exploration of historical and cultural contingency is entirely

consistent with realist views of religious phenomena. Even if the train of constructionism makes its final stop in the relativity roundhouse at Quaquaversal Junction, we are free to get off the train at many points before that. The scenery is eye opening from the start. Constructionism and realism are theoretical tendencies that stand in productive mutual tension not in entrenched and mutually exclusive antagonism. But histories of building and inventories of raw materials require an attentiveness to theoretical and methodological issues that is often lacking in constructionist work in the study of religion.

The Need for Explicit Theory. The second of three issues to clarify is the paucity of explicit theory in constructionist work in religious studies. Constructionism is often simply asserted or taken for granted. Studies that appeal to ‘constructs’ or ‘constructionism’ are misleading, or at best trivial, unless they put forward (or draw explicitly on) a developed theory of the process and significance of construction. This involves specifying, first, how a specific sort of object or idea is constructed and from what raw materials, and, second, how this theoretical approach offers advantages with respect to other possible approaches. This is especially important in the face of the wide variety of objects and ideas that are treated as constructs.⁸

Two uses of ‘construction’ in religious studies can be immediately set aside as trivial in this sense. On the one hand, for example, western portrayals of Asian religions, a sectarian interpretation of a particular concept, a specific individual’s conception of religion, or a process leading to a particular institutional policy are described as ‘constructions’ (e.g., Urban 1999; Pennington 2001; Clarke 2001; Despland 1999; Mart 2000). As a marker of constructionism, we can set aside such uses because they do not offer any

⁸ For evidence of the diffuse usage of ‘construction’ in Religious Studies today, see the range of appearances the term makes in the thirty essays collected in the recent *Guide to the Study of Religion*: modes of construction include academic, cultural, narrative, and social; alleged constructs include boundaries, categories, concepts, descriptions, experience, oppositions, reality, religion, ruptures, the sacred, scholarship, society, subjects, systems, temporal geography, theories, totalities, and worlds (Braun and McCutcheon 2000, 4-5, 8, 22, 103, 105-7, 152, 189, 199, 262, 277, 285, 288-89, 335, 338, 342, 382, 399, 455, 458-59). Apart from William E. Paden’s excellent discussion of ‘world construction’ (334-47), little explicit attention is paid to constructionist theory or to the prominence of this metaphor in the study of religion. The term ‘construction’ is not indexed in the book, and the index entry for ‘social construction’ lists only two references, missing several others.

account of a process of construction apart from a nod to the general sense of contingency implied by any given perspective. The use of the concept of 'construction' in such studies is not necessarily problematic, for, if nothing else, it reminds readers of the historical and cultural contingency of religious phenomena. But readers should also be reminded that the presence of the word 'construction' does not itself imply, much less support, a constructionist theory.

On the other hand, a statistical correlation between race, gender, and the frequency of a particular religious experience is sometimes cited as evidence that the experience is 'socially constructed' (e.g., MacDonald 1992). For the same reason, this blunt recognition of correlation is not constructionist. Simply noting a correlation begs the explanatory question that any constructionist view must clarify. Neither of these sorts of cases offers or draws on a theory. Neither goes beyond talk of constructs to set out and defend a particular formulation of constructionism.

In other cases, the appeal to construction seems to be superfluous or even detrimental to a valuable critique. For example, a feminist critique of Otto's view of numinous experience is framed as a 'Katzian constructionist' approach, but the recognition of Otto's gender-biased appeals to experience is effective without recourse to the language of constructionism (Raphael 1994). And its contribution to the constructionist debate is minimal because it takes the contingency of religious experience for granted rather than arguing for it. Another study makes an excellent point that Barth's view of radical transcendence stands in tension with his view that homosexuality is unnatural, but, the choice to frame this as a constructionist critique does not add substantially to it (Balboa 1998). The value of these critiques is independent of the appeal to constructionism. In another example, a recent collection of common complaints about the institutional problems of religious studies and academia more generally (e.g., difficulties faced by women and recent graduates seeking employment and threats to the humanities in the face of corporate economic administrative models) frames these issues as one of "the construction of pedagogical spaces" (Juschka 1999). Again, the critique is valuable, but it is independent of talk of construction. These papers do not clarify their views of processes of construction enough to capitalize on the

theoretical perspective, or even to make clear how this perspective is useful in the specific contexts of their arguments.

Many studies go farther in acknowledging processes of construction yet without adequate theoretical clarification. They assert that construction is taking place without clarifying the nature of this claim and often without offering evidence that the proposed process does in fact take place. Such works describe or compare social, historical, or cultural variation in religious phenomena without addressing the mechanism(s) of this variation: i.e., alleged constructs are examined, but the process of construction is taken for granted.

A closer look at several studies that work with Weber's concept of charisma will illustrate the need to go beyond describing co-variation in order to explain the alleged process of construction. In a paper titled "The Social Construction of Charisma," Roy Wallis claims "to demonstrate empirically, Weber's view that charisma is not an inherent property of an individual, but of a social relationship, situationally generated" (1982, 38). Yet Wallis offers a very sparse account of the process of social construction, consisting primarily of an assertion that charismatic relationships develop through "a psychological exchange of affection, encouragement and security on the part of the leader for deference and affection on the part of the follower" (1982, 26-27). His evidence consists entirely of a biographical account of a single leader of one New Religious Movement. It comes as no surprise that Wallis is able to find the "exchange of affection . . . for . . . affection" that he seeks. His narrative emphasis on social exchanges that resonate with his theoretical perspective offers the same support for his constructionist view of charisma that a hagiographic account would offer for a naïve realist view. The same story could be told in ways that support a different theory.

A similar problem undermines the claims made in Daryl and Kendall White's paper "Charisma, Structure, and Contested Authority: The Social Construction of Authenticity in Mormonism" (1996). Apart from the title and abstract, the term 'social construction' occurs twice in the paper, once in the introduction and once in the conclusion. Elaboration of theory consists of a perfunctory nod to Weber's concept of routinization of charisma and occasional appeals to concepts such as centralization, institutionalization,

legitimation, and hegemony. As with Wallis' paper, what is missing is a more detailed account of the process of construction such that the data presented could serve to verify (or, ideally, to potentially falsify) specific claims regarding the role of discourse and social relations in producing charisma. Readers can agree or disagree with the claim that something is constructed, but such arguments provide no evidence, merely a possible interpretation.

The case is very different with Anthony Blasi's *Making Charisma: The Social Construction of Paul's Public Image* (1991). Blasi is a sociologist who considers himself a "scientist" in contrast to "religionists" (1995). In his book, he draws on symbolic interactionism and the work of Georges Gurwitsch to specify his approach to constructionism, and he uses his findings to reflect critically on Weber's conception of charisma. Though it is possible to critique aspects of Blasi's argument,⁹ his book is a valuable model of constructionism because the theory is laid out clearly, a wide range of material is brought to bear on the issue, and the findings serve to modify the theory in the face of anomalies that arise during the analysis.

Weber's view of charisma provides a paradigm case for developing social constructionist analyses. Weber developed his views in conscious opposition to Rudolph Sohm's realist analysis of the spiritual gifts of Jesus, Paul, and other teachers in the early Church (Haley 1980). For Sohm, charisma is a real spiritual gift that causes faith; for Weber "on the contrary, charisma is an ulterior, socially constructed reality, the result of popular faith rather than its cause" (D.N. Smith 1998, 35). Weber's analyses, though sometimes unclear and contradictory, are rich and nuanced enough to

⁹ Blasi concludes by "reconceptualizing" Weber's analysis based on his finding that Paul's charisma was constructed by the next generation in a moderate rather than extreme form (1991, 143ff.). Blasi argues that, according to Weber, this "rationalizing force" should be found only in the institutional routinization of charisma. Blasi claims to find that the charisma cooled off too much before routinization. Two important critiques present themselves. First, Blasi can be faulted for not paying sufficient account to a wider variety of social and historical factors that might provide alternative explanations. For example, he notes that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* were seen as marginal, but his explanation for this is limited and self-serving: he holds that they were ignored because they presented too exalted a view of Paul's charisma. This may have been the case, but it is important to consider alternative explanations, including reactions to the portrayal of atypical roles for women and to the implicit sanctioning of self-baptism. Second, Blasi's focus is the 'posthumous charisma' constructed by Paul's followers after his death. He finds fault with Weber's distinction between personal charisma and its routinization, because he finds here a personal charisma distinct from the person. But this is to halve his cake and eat it in two: a Weberian might reply that Blasi's account is a

emphasize both conservative and anti-traditionalist functions of charisma (Riesebrodt 1999). But it is irresponsible to use the concept of charisma as if its precise significance and theoretical implications can be taken as given. The problem with many appeals to the concept is a failure to clarify the processes by which charisma is constructed. This is a common example of the more general need to explicitly clarify the nature and implications of theory in studies that appeal to the concept of construction.

Comparing Catherine Bell's uses of 'construction' in her two books on ritual emphasizes both the move toward more effective theoretical development and the need for greater specification and clarity. In both books, Bell explores a number of dimensions of the historical and cultural contingency of ritual, emphasizing both discursive and social factors. The earlier book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* uses the ideas of construction, generation and constitution in overlapping ways (1992, 25, 29, 49-52, 54). (This slippage between apparent synonyms is often a sign that theory could be clearer in constructionist work.) Bell draws on work in hermeneutics to argue that object, method, and subject-object relationships are constructed (1992, 50-51). This supports her claim that theory and method are constructed (1992, 14, 16, 52). This in turn leads to her top-level claims that ritual, meaning, and discourse are constructs (1992, 19, 30, 47). The lack of clearly articulated constructionist theory leaves unclear the relations between these levels of claims. The dominant form of constructionist theory holds that objects and ideas are constructed through discursive and social processes. In Bell's book, ritual, discourse, and social relations, are all constructs. Though she is right to notice the circularity, a more limited focus would use and reflect on theory and method more effectively. Bell's exploration of the circularity of these constructive relations is valuable, but a more clearly articulated theory is needed to keep the web of relations clear.

Bell's later book, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* is stronger in two senses: it makes more explicit and effective use of theory, and it limits its constructionist claims to a more specific context (1997). However, it still makes such sweeping claims that it is unable to reflect back on the strength or

description of the first phase of the institutional routinization of charisma, in which case he has supported rather than critiqued Weber's view.

weakness of that theory. Her primary claims remain that ritual is a construct and that it constructs (1997, ix, 144, 251-52, 263-66). In this book, she draws explicitly on Berger's constructionist theory (1997, 251-52, 257; cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966, 72ff.). She situates her constructionist claims primarily in the more limited and appropriate context of "ritual reification" (1997, 253-67). However, these improvements in theoretical clarity are limited by a decision to present apparently all relevant factors as constructs, rather than to limit the scope to clearly explaining how one set of factors constructs another. Bell attempts to capture the circularity of the constructive role of ritual as construct, an admirable goal but one that again results in muddied water (1997, 81, 265-66). It remains unclear how constructionist theory applies. Where Berger and Luckmann argue that knowledge is constructed through socially mediated processes and institutions, especially roles, Bell's argument is much more sweeping. She holds that socially situated processes construct tradition, values, categories, discourse, and meaning, hence theories, all of which construct ritual; ritual in turn constructs cultural images, dispositions, and situations as well as community, identity, ethnicity, gender, and power, hence reality and worlds (1997, 75, 83, 86, 101, 144, 167, 225, 251-52, 263-66). This web of claims offers an insightful interpretation of the significance of ritual, but it overreaches, missing an opportunity to make a specific claim whose precise relation to theory and method would allow for confirmation or falsification by parallel studies.

A similar web of 'constructs' characterizes other constructionist work in Religious Studies. Richard Valantasis, for example, draws on a wide variety of theorists, primarily Wartenburg, Althusser, Foucault, Wyschogrod and the social semiotic theory of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, to develop a version of "power theory" that will facilitate his exploration of "constructions of power in asceticism" (1995, 792). "Construct*" appears over eighty times in the paper. Alleged constructs include alternatives to cultural givens, attitudes, definitions, identity, meaning, modalities, modes of communication, novelty, options, power, reality, relationships, social and religions categorization, subjects and subjectivity, symbolic universes, knowledge systems, truth, and worlds (e.g., 1995, 779, 790-91, 795-96, 199-803). Apparently synonymous verbs abound, including articulate, constitute, create, deconstruct, develop,

form, image, inaugurate, produce, reformulate, restructure, revise, and structure (e.g., 1995, 782, 795, 799, 813). This proliferation of constructionist claims seems designed to provide interpretive plausibility through analogical resonance rather than through concise theoretical work.

The place of ‘construction’ is ambiguous here. Valantasis often uses ‘construction of’ as a synonym for ‘view of’ or ‘portrayal of’: “Wartenburg . . . constructs power as *articulated*”; modern theories present a “negative construction of power” (1995, 779; italics in original). At other times, he is clearly making constructionist claims: “asceticism involves the construction of a symbolic universe . . . by producing and training ascetics in the logonomic, ideological, strategic, technological, and programmatic factors that enter into the construction of the ascetic’s reality and truth” (1995, 796). His key claims are ambiguous between these two senses of ‘construction’: “the definition of the social expresses a construction of power”; “asceticism involves the articulation and construction of a particular subjectivity that defines the sort of agency and identity toward which the ascetic moves”; the ascetic must know and understand the socially constructed options in order to withdraw from them”; “constructions of power in asceticism open a window” for scholars of religion (1995, 788, 795, 801, 816). The resolution of this ambiguity seems to reside in a closer consideration of the goals of this paper.

One reason for the vagueness and circularity of appeals to ‘construction’ in this sort of work is a tendency to emphasize interpretation rather than explanation. The interpretive agenda of Valantasis’ exploration of “constructions of power in asceticism” is clear from his method. He uses a sequence of theories to develop definitions of his two key terms, ‘power’ and ‘asceticism,’ and he uses these definitions to generate a typology of ascetic subjects.¹⁰ His goal is not to make a case that power is constructed in a specific manner in order to explain why asceticism takes the forms it does. He aims to

¹⁰ Citing Jean Baker Miller, Valantasis defines power as “*the capacity to produce a change*—that is, to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B”; and asceticism is “performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe” (Valantasis 1995, 793, 797; italics in original). This overly general definition of power seems to necessarily limit Valantasis to producing a typology: if power is anything that changes anything, we can do no more than characterize its internal differences. Broad key terms are another marker of interpretive rather than explanatory work: interpretive breadth often pulls in the opposite direction from explanatory rigour.

interpret moments in the history of asceticism in the light of a broad theory that takes account of “the unexplored areas identified by the critics” (1995, 778). This is underlined by the fact that Berger and Luckmann’s social constructionism makes an appearance in the paper, but only after the typology of ascetic subjects is generated. This, the paper’s only explicit appeal to constructionist theory, seems intended to give warrant to an interpretation after the fact, rather than to shape an explanation of how specific raw materials are drawn on in a clearly defined process of construction.

As a result, Valantasis offers an interpretation of construction as itself a form of active interpretation. ‘Constructions of power in asceticism’ are interpretations that change the world through a process of socially situated reification. This is a valuable and powerful interpretation, one that perhaps reflects an optimistic view of the power of scholarly interpretations. But it is not constructionism at its best, because the emphasis is not on clarifying how processes of construction occur. The emphasis is on how they can help us to better understand religious phenomena: a worthy goal, but establishing the details of construction must come first.

Social scientific explanations distinguish clearly between dependent and independent variables. The lack of this distinction is precisely what characterizes the web of ‘constructs’ that we find in many appeals to constructionism in Religious Studies, including those of Bell and Valantasis. A more limited examination of the construction of ritual through specific discursive or social processes, or of the role of ritual in constructing specific social forms, would go beyond a sketch of a complex whole of mutually constructed parts to a more properly social scientific analysis of one piece of the puzzle.

In sum, constructionist work in religious studies seldom warrants the name because the operative concept, ‘construction,’ is often not defined and the characteristics and relative value of a constructionist approach are not contrasted clearly with an alternative position. Interpreting contextual variation is very different than explaining it. To simply describe religious phenomena as context-bound, historically developed, and culture-specific begs the question that lies at the heart of constructionism: how do discourse

and other social processes selectively constrain or facilitate certain types of human action or social phenomena?

As a result, in the study of religion, constructionism sometimes denotes little more than a general allegiance to theoretical assumptions that are shared by most scholars of religion. As a result, it is not always a helpful term. On the one hand, basic theoretical work in the field often shares similar characteristics without appeal to constructionism. For example, much of the scholarship on ‘purity’ in Hinduism has been shaped by the tension between Louis Dumont’s structuralist and McKim Marriott’s transactional models, both of which are, broadly speaking, constructionist. Dumont’s dualist structuralist stance explores the discursive and social constitution of hierarchy in a comparative context (1970). Marriott denies the dualism, but explores the contingent constitution of purity through social and discursive processes (1976; 1990). On the other hand, the label ‘social constructionism’ is often claimed by works that describe or compare social, historical, or cultural variation of religious phenomena without addressing the mechanism(s) of this variation: i.e., alleged constructs are examined, but the process of construction is taken for granted.

To simply describe religious phenomena as context-bound, historically developed, and culture-specific begs the question that lies at the heart of constructionism: “how does discourse selectively constrain or facilitate certain types of human action or social phenomena?” The assertion that one has uncovered some construction is an empty claim unless the process is clarified to an extent that allows for verification or falsification of the theoretical perspective. Anyone can recognize contingency; the task is to explain it.

The Many Axes of Theory. The third point of clarification is that of constructionism’s relation to other theoretical approaches in the field. We can imagine a series of axes describing a multi-dimensional space of theoretical possibilities. So, for example, a given theory of religion could be constructionist or realist, reductionist or *sui generis*. It could be naturalistic or posit supernatural objects. It could aim at interpretation or at explanation. Along each of these axes and many others, a given theory could take an extreme position; or, here is the key point, it could take an intermediate

position. As noted above, for example, a constructionist approach does not rule out realism. In addition, an extreme position on one axis does not necessitate an extreme position on any other. For example, as I argue below, a realist position can be reductionist or *sui generis* or somewhere in between.

Russell McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion* illustrates the need to keep the various axes of theory distinct. McCutcheon presents social constructionist and *sui generis* discourses on religion as sharply opposed contraries (1997a, 7-8, 11, 15, 99, 129, 193; cf. 1997b). He characterizes the *sui generis* position as one holding that religious phenomena constitute an autonomous realm, not derived from or reducible to economic or social phenomena. As corollaries, he asserts that the study of religion(s) draws on vague concepts to define its object of study (e.g., the ultimate, sacred, mystery); it favors an intuitive hermeneutic methodology; it prioritizes the insider's perspective; and its end product is a series of personalistic and nonfalsifiable claims (1997a, 53, 124, 197). The consequences of the alleged dominance of the *sui generis* approach to the study of religion are a neglect of "difference, history and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity" (1997a, 3). The ultimate implication is the potential self-destruction of the field of religious studies because a field that appeals to the ineffable and the nonfalsifiable is less likely to secure funding: the untestable claim that religion offers distinct phenomena to study cannot offer a bulwark preventive the erosion and collapse of departments of religion, with scholars reassigned and hired to fit into other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities and into area studies (1997a, 204). According to McCutcheon, "The challenge, then, is either to reconstruct the study of religion without *sui generis* religion or allow it to dissolve into the various fields from which it originally developed" (1997a, 210).

For McCutcheon, the reconstruction of the study of religion necessitates a social constructionist, reductionist, naturalist approach that would allow scholars of religion to put forward testable claims that take account of religions' social, economic, and political contexts; this approach, in turn, would allow the discipline to solidify its institutional position, in part through forging connections with other disciplines, and it would allow

scholars of religion to play a more effective critical role on the public stage (1997a, 17, 208, 210; 1997b; cf. 1997c; 2000).

McCutcheon's argument, however, is unclear and, for that reason, inflammatory. It is misleading to equate constructionist, reductionist, and naturalist approaches to the study of religion. The approaches are not equivalent. Constructionism is one of several axes of theory that must be kept distinct. As a result, McCutcheon's portrayal of a unified alternative to 'sui generis religion' implies a mutually antagonistic and exclusive dichotomy between theoretical approaches.¹¹ Catherine Bell notes that the institutional place of religious studies might be rendered more credible "if scholars of religion ease up on the polemics of fear and threat that frame scholarly objectivity by virtue of some polar opposite" (Bell 1996, 189). This seems sound advice for both sides of the divide that McCutcheon presents us with.

Relations between constructionist, reductionist, and naturalist approaches are contingent. (Their linking is, in fact, constructed by current debates and positions in the field.) So, for example, constructionist positions can be realist, premised on the reality of the raw materials that form the basis of the construction process. Or they can be relativist, arguing that religious phenomena are entirely context dependent and nothing but constructions. On another metatheoretical axis, a reductionist position can be *sui generis*. *Sui generis* stances are generally framed as necessarily essentialist, based in a realist view of the referents of theological language or of phenomenological appeals to the sacred, the holy, or the numinous. On this view *sui generis* and reductionist perspectives would be mutually exclusive. But this is simply not the case. '*Sui generis*' simply implies that the objects of religion or the discipline's methods or theories are distinctive. There is no *a priori* reason that one cannot argue that religious phenomena are reducible to a set of phenomena *unique to religion*. We cannot dismiss out of hand the possibility that the raw materials of religion, or theories and methods for analyzing how religious phenomena are constituted from these raw materials, are distinctive.

¹¹ See, for example, his exchange with Brian S. Rennie (McCutcheon 1998; Rennie 1998; McCutcheon 1999). Sparked by McCutcheon's extreme formulation of the issues, this exchange resonates with a similar dance of straw dolls in another corner of the constructionist debate. See the frequently cited 'Death and Furniture' exchange over relativism in *History of the Human Sciences* (Edwards et al. 1995; O'Neill 1995).

Having reduced the sacred to something else, the question of that something's status is one for further research not normative *fiat*.

Recent research into the cognitive basis of religion is a good example of this (e.g., Andresen *et al.* 2000; Newberg *et al.* 2001). Such work seems on track to conclude that the stimulation of specific regions of the brain gives rise to uniquely religious experiences. In other words, this work could serve as the basis for a reductionist, realist, *sui generis* theory of religion. Moreover, a constructionist theory could argue that these neural processes give rise through linguistically and socially mediated processes to a variety of context-specific manifestations (cf. Lawson and McCauley 1990, 180-81; Benavides 2001, 105). Such a theory would be reductionist, naturalist, materialist, *sui generis*, and constructionist. Neuro-scientific research is just one example that calls into question frequent assumptions that *sui generis* approaches to religion are necessarily realist or that constructionist approaches are necessarily antirealist.

Rational choice theory, to take a different example, is reductionist, privileging economic analysis (Stark and Bainbridge 1996); but it is consistent with a *sui generis* and realist view of the values that inform religious compensators (Young 1997). A critic might argue that realism is beside the point here and that the *sui generis* nature of religious compensators may indicate no more than “supernatural assumptions . . . not readily accessible to unambiguous evaluation” (Bainbridge 1997, 11). The point remains: a naturalistic, reductionistic approach *does not necessarily rule out* realist or *sui generis* theories of religion. Nothing prevents us logically from asserting both that God, or the sacred, exists and that human beings act on the basis of rational choices based on the availability and distribution of religious goods. There is no *a priori* disjunction or link between *sui generis*, reductionist, naturalist, realist, and constructionist characteristics of theories of religion. The position of a given theory along these and other axes is not constrained at the outset, though it will be constrained by the decision to pursue the goal of interpretation over that of explanation.

A hypothetical example will consolidate this point: a constructionist theory could include African or Confucian ancestors in the network of social relations that constructs religious phenomena. It might limit itself

theoretically and methodologically to a rigorous application of social exchange theory with elements of symbolic interactionism. Such a theory would be reductionist, constructionist, *sui generis*, and realist regarding otherworldly phenomena. The point is not that we should develop such a theory, but that we could.

Conclusion

Recent debates take too much for granted. The mix of theoretical characteristics in theories of religion is constrained not by logical necessity but by historical trajectories and ideological interests. Constructionism does not rule out realism nor does reductionism rule out *sui generis* views. It is interesting, though, that many discussions in the study of religion take these false metatheoretical claims for granted. It might be objected that my hypothetical shuffling of theoretical characteristics is pointless, that it is merely a mental game. In reply, it may seem academic, but that is the point, of course. This is not free play but a practical recognition that certain possibilities are neglected—certain paths are not explored. Middle ground theories (e.g., constructionist realism or *sui generis* reductionism) are often marginal in Religious Studies. Their relative absence is an empirical fact not a theoretical necessity.

I do not mean to suggest that such theories are necessarily valuable, or that theoretical plenitude is good in itself. Rather, investigating the way in which certain possibilities have been overlooked may well tell us something valuable about the field itself. This is where a constructionist genealogy of constructionism would find its purchase. The fact that scholars of religion tend to emphasize the endpoints of certain theoretical axes is itself a phenomenon worthy of investigation. A key factor in this phenomenon is the portrayal of constructionism as the other of religion's two realisms: a theological foot resting on God and a phenomenological foot resting on the sacred. Yet constructionism neither pulls the rug out from under religion nor tries to pull us up by our bootstraps; it simply notes that the grounds are already landscaped.

Another key factor is that scholars of religion value interpretation more than explanation. The set of possible theories of religion is much larger than the subset of those actually used. Metatheoretical decisions determine this reduction of possibilities. The study of religion would look very different if—instead of interpretive breadth and analogical resonance—explanatory power, replication, and falsification were the criteria used to choose among the space of theoretical possibilities.

Despite his dualistic portrayal of constructionism and *sui generis* approaches to the study of religion, McCutcheon flags an important point. Portraying constructionism and reductionism as the antagonists of essentialist and *sui generis* views elides a central question in the study of religion: “How is difference produced and maintained?” Constructionist studies that aim to explain specific elements of contingency on the basis of clearly articulated theories and appropriate methods might prove very useful in addressing this question.

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