



## Ten Implications of Semantic Holism for Theories of Religion

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### Abstract

This article proposes ten theses on the impact of semantic holism (an important philosophical view of meaning) on theories of religion. We argue that, if correct, semantic holism imposes metatheoretical constraints on the nature of such theories, theoretical constraints on the way that “religion” must be characterized, and methodological constraints on the way that religious phenomena must be analyzed.

### Keywords

theories of religion, metatheory, theory, methodology, definitions of religion, semantic holism, Donald Davidson, interpretation

There was a time when overarching theories purported to explain all aspects of some phenomenon or subject matter. Thus, psychoanalysis originally purported to explain all aspects of individual behaviour; dialectical materialism purported to explain all aspects of social relations; and Eliade’s ontology of the sacred purported to explain all aspects of religion. With the possible exceptions of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory in biology and certain micro-meso-macro theories in sociology, the days of grand theorizing seem dead and gone. This is due in part to the overwhelming complexity of phenomena in all subject areas. It is also partly due to the increasing rejection of the notion of disciplinary silos, as is reflected in greater recognition of the value of interdisciplinary work. A third factor—the one that interests us here—is philosophical advances in our understanding of the nature of theories and theorizing, along with related issues, such as the nature of explanation and interpretation. The result of much of this work, particularly in the philosophy of science, has been to reject outright that “theory” and “explanation” are univocal natural kinds, and to insist that multi-vocal and family-resemblance conceptions are

more fruitful. Michael Stausberg, in his Introduction to *Contemporary Theories of Religion*, outlines some of the main elements and trends of this diversification, with specific reference to theories of religion (Stausberg 2009: 1-21).<sup>1</sup>

What, then, are the prospects for theorizing religion in the post-grand theory era? The seventeen theories discussed in Stausberg's collection provide rich examples of the multi-disciplinary approach and suggest a firm commitment to methodological pluralism. Along these lines, theories are often viewed as "lenses" through which religious phenomena can be viewed, and wearing multiple lenses sharpens our vision—unless, of course, the lenses are counter-polarized.

In this article, we argue that semantic holism offers important insights into the project of theorizing about religion. Taking semantics seriously forces some rethinking, some re-examining of presuppositions and of the foundations on which our theorizing necessarily takes place. It is not that semantic holism is an unusual sort of lens; it is not a lens at all.<sup>2</sup> Semantic holism cannot simply be or produce a distinctive theory of religion, neither in harmony with nor in competition with other theories. It stands at a metatheoretical level, and it makes such basic, foundational claims that it brooks no pluralistic partners. In this brief article, we try to clarify this view and to draw out its consequences for theorizing at less basic levels, with particular reference to theorizing about religion. Our basic claim is that, *if correct or adequate, semantic holism imposes metatheoretical constraints on the nature of theories of religion, theoretical constraints on the way that 'religion' must be characterized, and methodological constraints on the way that religious phenomena must be analyzed.*

This is not the place, nor do we have the space (nor would most readers, even of *MTSR*, have the patience) for a detailed summary of the relevant philosophical work. For those interested, Jeppe Sinding Jensen has written an excellent brief overview of semantic theory aimed at scholars of religion (Jensen 2004). We stick here to the barest essentials necessary for developing our central claims. In the following, we privilege Donald Davidson's formulation of semantic holism (e.g., Davidson 1982a, 1984, 2001). Though widely adopted among philosophers, semantic holism has faced significant criticism. As with any important philosophical thesis, its acceptance is provisional. We

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Michael Stausberg for insightful comments on previous drafts.

<sup>2</sup> To the casual reader, Nancy Frankenberry's collection, *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, might seem to propose semantic holism as such a lens, a valuable addition to the toolkit of methodological pluralism (Frankenberry 2002b). After all, the book's back cover tells us that it presents "new methodological options for the study of religion in the twenty-first century." Given the metatheoretical position of holistic semantics, this is clearly not the case (Gardiner and Engler 2008).

believe it has at least deep *prima facie* plausibility, and it has enjoyed important and favorable treatment at the hands of several scholars of religion (e.g., Godlove 1989; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Frankenberry and Penner 1999; Frankenberry 2002b; Jensen 2003, 2004; Davis 2007; Gardiner and Engler 2008, 2010, Forthcoming). Here, we assume its adequacy without defense, discussing its consequences for theorizing about religion, rather than offering arguments in its support. We proceed by setting out ten theses, indicating how each follows from holistic semantic theory.

## I. Ten Theses

1. *Taking holistic semantics seriously turns us away from trying to find “the meaning” of religious phenomena (e.g., texts and rituals) toward a more dynamic form of interpretation.* Semantic holism is a theory of meaning. Where semantic atomism locates meaning at the level of words and semantic molecularism locates it at the level of sentences, semantic holism locates meaning at a broader level, ranging from an indefinite network of linked units to an entire language. It stands apart from these other views in rejecting the reification of meaning. That is, it holds that there is no *thing* which can be identified as *the meaning* of any particular bit of language (e.g., word, sentence, utterance, etc.). It also stands apart from these other views in seeing meaning as inherently dynamic: where meaning is defined in terms of a broad network of relations between words, sentences, beliefs, etc., the inherent changeability of those relations implies that meaning necessarily has a certain open-ended quality. Meaning is subject to several sorts of potential indeterminacy. We must move past thinking about meaning as something univocal and stable, i.e., as that which would be preserved in translation (as expressed, say, by a dictionary or translation manual). Meaning is to be understood in terms of interpretation, i.e., in understanding or making sense of the dynamic and contextualized beliefs, actions, behaviour, etc. of individuals or groups. The scholar of religion should investigate a rich range of propositional attitudes (beginning with beliefs and desires) and their relations with others that do not necessarily fall within the pre-determined scope of “religious” phenomena.
2. *The evidence upon which any viable theory of religion must rest is necessarily overt, public, and observable.* A fundamental constraint on interpretation, according to Davidsonian semantics, is that meanings are not private or “inner” mental states: they must be correlatable with external or publically accessible factors. Meaning is fleshed out in terms of interpretation, and interpretation can only rest upon public and observable evidence. For

example, mental states as understood in folk psychology cannot play this role.<sup>3</sup> What is left to interpret? In a word, action. Quite simply, rationality and, hence, meaning are manifested in action. In the search for meaning, it is the total behavior of an organism which must be interpreted as evidence. Studying religion involves taking account of a broad range of public and observable phenomena, not emphasizing, for example, private or transcendent evidence.

3. *As a methodological corollary, religious language and religious ritual must be analyzed in much the same way.* Language is a manifestation of rationality; it is the province of rational animals (Davidson 1982b). Both words and actions are fundamentally and equally manifestations of rationality. As such, in practical terms, both texts and rituals are linguistic activities broadly construed, and, therefore, they must be interpreted in terms of their underlying syntax and semantics. This requires analyzing the propositional attitudes—especially the beliefs and desires—of the agents involved. On the one hand, interpreting religious language and texts is rendered more complex when we let go of the reifying presupposition that “the meaning” is some *thing* that we can find embedded in the text. On the other hand, as is the case with religious words, to identify certain bodily movements *as* ritual is to presuppose that they are the intentional product of a rational creature. In both cases, we must give up on the search for “the meaning” of religious phenomena and embark on a more contextual, perspectival, and potentially indeterminate process of interpretation. There are important parallels between Davidsonian semantics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and hermeneutics (Wheeler 1986; Malpas 1992: 55-57).
4. *All theories, including theories of religion, fall under the purview of semantic holism.* All (actually constructed) theories are linguistic entities; all theorizing is a linguistic activity. As a result, all theories are interpretable, and, as such, they must be interpreted in conformity to the constraints on interpretation imposed by semantic holism. We see here how semantic holism does not stand at the level of one theory among others: it is a theory about the basic framework within which all theories aim to *make sense* of their objects.
5. *As a metatheoretical corollary, semantic holism provides criteria for rejecting untenable theories.* Basic constraints on meaning, as posited by semantic

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<sup>3</sup> A potential critique of cognitive theories of religion emerges here, insofar as they give a reductive account of religious phenomena in terms of innate categories corresponding to folk psychology, folk physics, etc. (see Engler and Gardiner Forthcoming.)

holism, are thus constraints on theories and on the process of theorizing itself. While conformity to such constraints cannot vindicate a theory, failure to conform would constitute grounds for rejection. (For example, if we grant the strong criticisms of atomistic and molecularist theories of meaning, then we must reject outright any theory of religion which presumes that meaning inheres in formal aspects of texts or rituals.) Aiming at such conformity should be one of the methodological “best practices” for producing good theories. It is, in traditional terms, one of the theoretical virtues, along with consistency, parsimony, empirical adequacy, etc.

6. *Semantic holism leads to a convergence between interpretation and explanation.* This is a point argued by many, of course, on grounds independent of semantic holism: it follows from the facts that all explanations presuppose certain interpretations of what constitutes evidence, and that all interpretations presuppose explanatory theories (see e.g., Lawson and McCauley 1990). An emphasis on semantic holism spells the point out in similar terms. Theories are necessarily theories of some phenomena. A theory is a theory of something to the extent that, at least in part, it aims at explaining that thing. A theory explains, at least in part, to the extent that it allows us to understand that phenomenon. To interpret is not to mechanically translate, but to informatively explain. To explain is to give a model of understanding.

The remaining theses warrant some set up. Stausberg notes four basic issues that full-blown theories of religion should seek to address: (i) the specificity of religion, (ii) the origins of religion, (iii) the function of religion, and (iv) the structure of religion (Stausberg 2009: 3–6). The first of these is fundamental. Insofar as a theory interprets and explains some phenomenon, demarcating or identifying that phenomenon comes first. Looking for the origins, functions, or structures of religion(s) presupposes prior criteria for identifying something as religious. Stausberg distinguishes two fundamental aspects of the question of specificity: *definition* and *demarcation*. The first seeks a set of identifiers—ranging from a set of essential characteristics (i.e., necessary and sufficient conditions) to a list of “typical features”—on the basis of which the theorist of religion selects the “data” from which to theorize or delimits the proper “object” of theoretical investigation. The second seeks to distinguish the religious from the non-religious, in part to aid in the definitional question and in part to carve out academic territory. The view that definitions are “short versions of theories” in the sense that they “consist in ways of viewing, or of frames within which questions are asked” reinforces the basic status of specificity to theorizing (Jensen 1999: 413).

Our remaining theses highlight four senses in which holistic semantic theories undermine the alleged distinctiveness of religious phenomena and of theories about religion. That is, insofar as sacredness is marked by separation, semantic holism desacralizes theories of religion.

7. *There is no distinctly “religious” type of meaning or interpretation.* Meaning—interpretability—lies at the most basic or foundational level of all rational activity, including the production of language and other actions. Semantic holism is committed to a wholesale rejection of any form of semantic bifurcation. There cannot be fundamentally different types of meaning or interpretation. Some common ground would be required in order for us to be able to understand what different types of meaning mean, or to interpret the different types of interpretation. Any such hypothetical differences immediately dissolve into the common ground required to make sense of them as different. Davidson famously rejected the idea that there can be such a thing as metaphorical meaning distinct from literal meaning; and the same critique applies to the possibility of some form of distinctly transcendent or symbolic meaning that supposedly emerges from some special relation between religious language and its “sacred” referents (Davidson 1978; Frankenberry 2002a; Penner 2002). Paying attention to semantics calls into question the special status of religious language: “The question seems to be whether there really is any such specific entity as ‘religious language’ and/or whether the semantics of religious systems are just ‘plain’ semantics of an order similar to other specialized terminological systems, those of, say, politics, sports or economics” (Jensen 2004: 220). This point has methodological implications, of course: treating religious language the same as other types of language implies that we must study it with the same tools and approaches.
8. *As one metatheoretical corollary, there cannot be radically different sorts of theories.* Given the correlativity of interpretation and explanation, the univocality of interpretation forces a univocality of explanation. In other words, rejection of a bifurcation of meaning entails a rejection of a bifurcation of theory. This means that the main conceptual elements of theory, principally explanation but also such things as the data/theory relation, sources of evidence, theoretical virtues, “law,” etc. must be uniformly understood across the nodes of any “methodological pluralism.” For example, it would be incoherent to suppose that two theories can bear on the same subject matter where one requires evidence to be observable, public, and naturalistic while the other admits transcendent, private, and/or sui

generis sources. These simply could not be theories *of* the same phenomena. Point (5) above—more fully informed by further aspects of Davidsonian holism—would invalidate this second sort of “theory” altogether, not on the basis that it is a poor theory, but rather on the basis that it cannot be a *theory* at all because it fails to *interpret* its presumed subject matter. An example of acceptable methodological pluralism, on this view, would be molecular biology and biogeography, i.e., two different theories that take comparable approaches to the same phenomena. The theories of Mircea Eliade and Pascal Boyer, on the other hand, are simply not theories about the same phenomena. This is part and parcel of a key consequence of holism: the impossibility—the incoherence—of “alternative conceptual schemes” (Davidson 1974). Semantic holism casts methodological pluralism in a new light.

9. *As a further metatheoretical corollary, there can be no radical difference between different subject matters.* This is so for two reasons. (i) The concept of truth is a much simpler and more basic one than the concept of a “fact”: we explicate “fact” in terms of “truth,” not vice versa. (A traditional correspondence theory of truth does the latter, but such an approach must be rejected as inadequate; see Gardiner and Engler 2010.) Truth—that which belief aims at—plays a simple and de-metaphysicalized regulative role in interpretation. Truth, like meaning and explanation, does not bifurcate; the *truth* of a statement about mathematics does not differ from the *truth* of statements about geography or about ethics or about chemistry or about religion. In other words, if the same set of factors simultaneously constrains all interpretation and explanation, and if our conception of the subject matter of a theory cannot be usefully understood independently of our *interpretable attitudes* about that subject matter, then we cannot think of differences in subject matters as differences in *kind*. (ii) Semantic holism explicates meaning by reference to positions or roles in a vast web of interconnected points whose portions do not admit of discrete dissection. Understanding the claim that Yahweh called to Moses from a burning bush blends items from traditionally different subject matters, e.g., Jewish scriptural tradition, botany, and pyrogenics. The meaning of each those nodes is given by relation to still others, and so on (see Gardiner and Engler Forthcoming). To assert that the subject matter of this claim is specifically *religious* indicates one’s basic focus or interest on some subset of the semantic network, but it does not identify some fundamental semantic or ontological category. If we view meaning in holistic terms, the subject matter of religion cannot be *sui generis*.

10. *As a theoretical corollary, semantic holism precludes a strong insider/outsider dichotomy.* “Insiders” can have no privileged, private, hidden, or incommensurable understanding of their own religious experience: they are just as constrained in their interpretations as are “outsiders.” Similarly, “insiders” have the same access to the evidence on which the interpretations of “outsiders” are based: the scholar of religion does not have privileged access to—or any distinct type of—evidence. In other words, it follows from point (8) above that insiders and outsiders cannot have radically different sorts of theories about religious phenomena. Given its denial of any bifurcation of meaning and its emphasis on overt, public, and observable evidence, semantic holism rules out claims that the beliefs of the practitioner are incommensurable with those of the scholar, that the beliefs of the practitioner are uniquely situated to reveal the meaning of religious phenomena, or that the beliefs of the practitioner are theoretically and methodologically impotent, with no role to play in the study of religion.

## II. Consequences

Avoiding the above implications of semantic holism would require defending an alternative account of meaning. All theories presuppose a stance regarding the nature of meaning. The issue can be ignored but not avoided. Theories of religion have, almost without exception, been curiously remiss in failing to examine this ground on which they necessarily stand. Philosophy teaches us that holistic semantic theories avoid many of the serious problems of other approaches to meaning (e.g., those that see meaning as inhering in words or sentences). Semantic holism is, of course, not beyond critique itself. However, based on the current state of debate, it seems to offer the best bet for theorizing the meaning of religious phenomena. Work since Lawson and McCauley’s pioneering, albeit flawed, emphasis on semantic holism in *Rethinking Religion* (1990; see Engler and Gardiner 2009) strongly suggests that it offers distinct theoretical advantages for the study of religion. It can help us avoid, for example, the reification of meaning in texts and the rigidity of syntactically-focused theories of ritual. However, it imposes challenging constraints on how theories of religion frame meaning and interpretation.

We end by re-capping two of the main implications discussed above. First, there is an important meta-theoretical lesson: semantic holism provides a basis on which to assess theories of religion. To draw a parallel, one of the underappreciated aspects of cognitive approaches to religion is that—whether or not one agrees with the over-arching theoretical agenda—they present strong



empirical evidence regarding how people think. As a result, they allow us to critique attempts to interpret religious phenomena (e.g., Lanman 2007). In order to be viable, theories of religion should take account of the best evidence regarding how people actually think. Semantics can play a comparable role: theories of religion that run afoul of, for example, problems with logo-centric conceptions of the meaning of religious language should be discarded as non-starters. It follows that theorists of religion should pay closer attention to what are considered the more promising approaches to meaning and interpretation.

Second, a holistic semantics has two important implications for defining and demarcating “religion.” (i) It forces us to reject the possibility of different types of meaning, including any distinct sense of religious meaning. For example, religion cannot be defined in terms of any uniquely transcendent, holy, spiritual or mystical way in which certain forms of language or action have meaning; religious phenomena cannot be distinguished in terms of their bearing some distinct symbolic relation to “the sacred,” where evidence of the latter is *sui generis*, private or non-observable. (ii) More generally, the distinction between religion and non-religion is practical not substantive. That is, the meaning of religious words, actions and beliefs (and other propositional attitudes) is a function of their relations to a vast network of other words, actions and beliefs. Some elements of this web will be “religious” (by whatever criteria we choose) and some “non-religious.” The choice of where to draw this line emerges from theoretical and meta-theoretical considerations; there is no “religiousness” inherent in any subset of these elements themselves.

In sum, taking semantic holism seriously has significant implications for the status of theories of religion, for the definition and demarcation of “religion,” and for how we go about studying religious phenomena.

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