The Social Construction of Reality (1966) Revisited: Epistemology and Theorizing in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

This paper takes the social constructivist approach, formulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, as a starting point for an investigation into epistemology and theorizing in the contemporary study of religion. It discusses various strands of scholarship in dialogue with social constructivism and questions in particular the reductionism of radical constructivist positions. Exploring the boundaries of the classical social constructivist paradigm, the article argues that students of religion should consider the implication of social, historical, embodied and material structures in the production of knowledge about religion. For that purpose, it draws on various soft realist approaches to stress the importance of remaining attentive to positionality (reflecting on the sites from where we theorize) and contextuality (reflecting on the inter-relation of discourse and materiality) in theorizing "religion". Finally, the article suggests that soft realist positions can be integrated in a slightly broadened social constructivist framework for the study of religion.

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Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.

KARL MARX, *Das Kapital*, quoted in Vasquez 2011:125

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[T]he organism continues to affect each phase of man's reality-constructing activity and … the organism, in turn, is itself affected by this activity. Put crudely, man's animality is transformed in socialization, but it is not abolished … It is possible to speak of a dialectic between nature and society.

BERGER ET AL. 1991:201

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Prologue: The Contested Field of the Study of Religion

Orienting oneself within the field of the modern study of religion is a daring enterprise. This field brings together a multitude of theoretical and methodological approaches and draws on various roots, including enlightenment rationalism and positivism, as well as romanticism, while also drawing on the traditions of the canonical disciplines (theology, philosophy, philology, history) of the European university. It is possible to speak of a "professionalization of knowledge about religion" since the late 19th century (Stuckrad 2014:180). Well into the 20th century, the study of religion was organized by a Western gaze, shaped by West European and North American perspectives on religion, which themselves changed with the colonial encounter and accelerating globalization. Within this context, the emerging methodologies of anthropology and sociology began to wield influence on the study of religion. In the later decades of the 20th century, new research programs that challenged conventional epistemologies and methodologies emerged (such as postcolonial studies as well as feminist and gender studies) and contributed to a further diversification of the discipline. In general, a trend from humanistic to social scientific approaches, with an increased focus on contemporary issues has changed the contours of the discipline, and this is reflected on all levels of teaching and research.

Scholars of religious studies today may experience the plurality of approaches employed in the study of religion as both enriching and challenging. While for some studying religion is in itself an inter-disciplinary, or even a trans-disciplinary enterprise (Kippenberg et al. 2003; Krech 2006; Freiberger et al. 2013; Stausberg et al. 2017), others are more invested in the specification and defense of disciplinary boundaries (Kleine 2010; Bochinger et al. 2015b). Despite the trend toward a social scientification of the study of religion, the discipline remained in many countries at least partially situated in theological institutions and related to theological discourses. Theology continues to be an important point of reference for the field of religious studies, either as the unloved sibling that should be disinherited, or recognized as complementary practice within the field.

Conceptualizations of religious studies in relation to neighboring disciplines are strongly related to the history of the discipline in their specific national contexts and institutional arrangements. In Germany for example, the power imbalance between theology and religious studies, and the complicated institutional setting with approximately 50% of religious studies chairs situated in theology departments is for many practitioners of religious studies rather unsatisfying (Bochinger et al. 2015a:290-291). Hence, we find the defensive position more pronounced in national contexts like Germany, where competition with regard to expertise on religion between science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) and theology has been foundational for the identity of the academic study of religion and is still constitutive of the field.[1] Having to defend their institutional ground and the legitimacy of religious studies as a non-theological discipline, adherents of the academic study of religion tend to spend more energy on the formulation of boundaries between religious studies and theology than, for example, their colleagues in the United States. In American universities, religious studies as a label does not exclude theology and the concern is less about institutional boundaries than about approaches to religion. This is reflected, for example, in the distinction "between teaching *of*" and "teaching *about*" religion. In addition, in the United States the power balance between religious studies and theology is, at least for the public education sector, reversed to the German situation. Because of the hegemonic interpretation of the First Amendment's establishment clause, religious studies ("teaching about") is in the public school sector privileged over theology ("teaching of") (Imhoff 2016).

Context also matters with regard to the dominant knowledge about religion and its proper place in a given society, the existence or nonexistence of

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1 For a historical account of the modern formation of the study of religion in Germany with particular attention to its evolvement across various academic disciplines, see Krech (2002).

experiences with colonialism, as well as demographic and other socio-economic and political factors.[2] The resulting heterogeneity of religious studies—both nationally and transnationally in relation to specific settings and research agendas—is not always a pluralism by heart. It should rather be understood as the unstable product of continuous intra-, trans-, and interdisciplinary boundary work against the backdrop of various historical, cultural, and political experiences, socio-economic, legal, and institutional arrangements, and the resultant complex knowledge formations.

I   Introduction

This article launches an inquiry into the epistemologies of a selected number of recent theorizations of religion that remain indebted to the social constructivist paradigm, while punctually transgressing it. The first goal is to provide a heuristically useful angle for distinguishing between competing research agendas and to thus offer some orientation within a confusing research field.[3] For this purpose, I have chosen the social constructivist approach as formulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966; henceforth SCR) as starting point of this investigation. The first part of the paper recapitulates the basic premises of SCR and discusses its implications for the study of religion. It then critically engages with examples of discourse-centered, anti-realist constructivist positions, with particular attention to the work of Russell McCutcheon, and a recent contribution by Kocku von Stuckrad. Against radical constructivist approaches that either limit the focus to the deconstruction of the category of religion, or study religion only as a discourse, I argue that it is important to acknowledge the reality of the social construct "religion", which therefore should be subject to analytical reflection (see also Bochinger et al. 2015b:347; Schilbrack 2012).

Exploring the boundaries of the classical social constructivist paradigm, I further argue that students of religion should also consider the implication of social, historical, embodied, and material structures in the production of knowledge about religion. Against radical constructivism, I draw on Talal Asad who argues through his rereading of tradition that religions cannot be reduced to language and text. The second part explores the potential of selected

2   For a global perspective on the formation of Religious Studies see Alles (2008).

3   For other recent attempts to specify the methodological and theoretical agendas, reach, and limits of religious studies see, for example, Stausberg (2009); Bergunder (2014), Bochinger et al. (2015b), Tweed (2016).

attempts that aim to open the social constructivist paradigm based on quali-fied realist positions. With references to the interventions of Bruno Latour, this section firstly addresses the post-constructivist position. It then discusses in more detail recent contributions by Thomas Tweed and Manuel Vasquez, both of which offer valuable arguments that can be employed for a broadening of the social constructivist approach as formulated by Berger and Luckmann. The qualified realist approaches by Tweed and Vasquez stress the importance of remaining attentive to positionality (reflecting on the sites from where we theorize) and contextuality (reflecting on the inter-relation of discourse and materiality), respectively, in theorizing "religion".

At last, I suggest that soft realist positions can be integrated in a slightly broadened social constructivist framework for the study of religion. Such a framework should pay more attention to how non-discursive processes and structures, as well as material and embodied realities impact on knowledge production with regard to religion.[4]

II   Social Constructivism

II.I   *The Classical Paradigm*

> Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.
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>   BERGER ET AL. 1991:79

Distinguishing different approaches to the study of religion, we may isolate three epistemological camps. Firstly, there is the realist position, for whom the concept "religion" points to a reality that exists independent of second order discourses about it. Most theologians as well as scholars following the phe-nomenological approach in the study of religion would probably sympathize with this position. Secondly, there is the anti-realist or (radical) constructivist position, which denies that the concept of religion points to a reality that exists independent of its discursive construction. If pressed on their epistemological presuppositions, I would assume that most students of religion would prob-ably self-identify with either this anti-realist constructivist approach or resort to a third option, a version associated with the social constructivist paradigm

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4   The selection of authors discussed in this text is not exhaustive of the field. The positions presented here were chosen to exemplify the heuristic usefulness and the limits of variations of the constructivist paradigm and their implications for the study of religion.

(cf. Schüler 2014:7-8). SCR constitutes a sociology of knowledge approach that is interested in the intersubjective and objectified knowledge of everyday life-worlds and the process of its formation.[5] The most influential formulation of constructivism in the social sciences, SCR can be described as a kind of social realism. That is, it postulates a reality as product of social world construction, a reality that is not absolute in a metaphysical sense, but socially defined (Berger et al. 1991:134).

It should be well understood that my claims are restricted to SCR, which is not representative of the entire scholarly oeuvre of either Berger or Luckmann.[6] According to SCR, social reality is created in a dialectical process of external-ization, objectification, and internalization. Individual and social actions, and the meanings attributed to them eventually lead to routinization and habitu-alization (externalization). Actions are thus typified and engender concepts about these actions, which are then institutionalized, that is, subjected to so-cial control (that forms a corner stone of society). Over time, institutions are objectified and reified through processes of socialization and habitualization. The product is the reality of the social world as we internalize it and to the dialectical formation of which we contribute.

SCR understands the process of knowledge production and the objectifi-cation of such produced knowledge as "social world" as taking place against the backdrop of the "natural world" (Berger et al. 1991:77). "Man" is the prod-uct of objectified society—not determined by the "human organism", though constraint by its limitations (Berger et al. 1991:66). How to theorize the re-lationship between social world-making and the impact of the existence of a natural world independent of a social world has proven to be a difficult problem for constructivists.[7] The self-imposed limitation of SCR to the social dimension of world-making has remained a matter of contestation and a driv-ing impulse for the formation of alternative epistemologies. I will revisit this point below.

Lastly, it needs to be noted that there always has been a certain termino-logical confusion regarding the distinction between social construct*ivism* and

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5   SCR was inspired by the work of Alfred Schütz, who went beyond the phenomenological focus on subjective experience and addressed intersubjectively valid life-worlds.

6   It is helpful to remind ourselves that both Berger and Luckmann repeatedly rejected the label "constructivist". In his later work, Berger (1974) even drew on a substantive definition of religion, explicitly rejecting functionalism, to which Luckmann would resort (Knoblauch et al. 2016:53-54 and 63).

7   On the reception and spread of SCR in the social sciences and beyond see Knoblauch et al. (2016). For an influential, polemical criticism of social constructivism see Hacking (2000).

social construct*ionism*, both terms being employed in various ways that are sometimes related to, but most often not, to SCR (Knoblauch et al. 2016:54-56). With references to usage in Anglophone scholarship, Hacking distinguishes (2000:45-49) between (1) (*social*) *constructionism* as a social, historical, and/ or philosophical project; (2) *constructivism* as an approach in the sciences, especially mathematics; and (3) *constructionalism* as an approach in philosophy and psychology. In the German context, *Sozialkonstruktivismus* ("social constructivism") is the most common term for scholarship in the Berger/ Luckmann tradition. Hubert Knoblauch has variously emphasized the importance of distinguishing SCR from competing approaches within cognitive science that use the label social constructionism,[8] as well as from radical constructivist approaches (such as Luhmann's system theory and discourse theory). Radical constructivism proposes communication as the principle that structures reality, or attributes a similarly autopoietic role to discourse. One important difference of SCR compared to both social constructionism and radical constructivism is that it, as I will demonstrate, gives considerably more weight to the agency of individuals and groups in the generation of social reality. While constructionism and radical constructivism conceive of the subject as a product of the constructivist process, social constructivism attributes a central role to an individual's agency in the process of world construction (Knoblauch et al. 2004:122-124; Knoblauch et al. 2016:61-63).

II.I.I   Religion Is Real

As a theory of action, SCR is anthropocentric in the sense that it attributes to humans a key position in the production of social knowledge. According to SCR, the products of this construction, which one may compare to Durkheim's "collective representations" (*représentations collectives*),[9] are real.

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8   "[S]ocial *construction*, Berger and Luckmann stress, is accomplished not by meaning, typification, or consciousness; social reality is, rather, constructed by processes which are specifically social" (Knoblauch et al. 2016:64). It can thus not be reduced to cognition, this being one way to distinguish it from the individualism of constructionism (Knoblauch et al. 2016:65).

9   Collective representations (*représentations collectives*) for Durkheim are the ideals, values, morals, myths, and legends that are shared by a group; they are the unconsciously created product of a particular social body, the means by which a group manifests itself socially independent from individual realities. Collective representations specify the dependence of collective ideas—in which alone Durkheim was interested—on the particular social realities to which they relate: "[W]hat collective representations express is the way in which the group thinks of itself in its relations with objects that affect it ... To understand the way in which a society conceives of itself and the world that surrounds it, we must consider the nature of the society, not the nature of the individuals" (Durkheim 2005:44-45).

It needs to be stated clearly that SCR is not a theory of religion, even if the work addresses the question of where to place religion within its framework. Berger/Luckmann suggest in SCR that religion(s) may be located at the level of the "symbolic universe", the "matrix of *all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings", through which social institutions are legitimized with reference to realities transcending them. The symbolic universe, which Berger and Luckmann relate (1991:226 n.69) to Durkheim's *réligion*, and to which they ascribe a nomic function for the individual, represents the highest form of legitimation: "Institutional roles become modes of participation in a universe that transcends *and* includes the institutional order" (Berger et al. 1991:114). The theoretical difference between Durkheim's approach and that of SCR is that the former attributes comparatively more weight to the collective. In SCR, the formation of reality is part of a dialectic process that does not privilege the collective in relation to the individual. Berger and Luckmann (1991:28-30) connect Durkheim's emphasis on the empirical facticity of society with Max Weber's emphasis on individual agency in the construction of meaning. In this way, SCR established an interpretive social theory against the functionalism of Talcott Parson that dominated at the time (Knoblauch et al. 2016:60).

Once objectified as social reality (or, as discourse), comparable to Durkheim's collective representations, it makes sense to investigate what this objectified reality "does" within human life-worlds and their ecological environments. As a social reality, "religion" should be taken seriously in no lesser way than how we take seriously, for example, the social reality of race, gender, politics, or the market: "Even if religion is an illusion or a myth inextricably connected to Western modernity, capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism, it is ... 'powerful' and 'widely disseminated'" (Vasquez 2011:325; cf. Schilbrack 2012:100-101). Understood in this way, SCR lends itself to a radically empiricist approach to religion, focused on inquiries into what individuals and groups have said, written, or expressed with regard to religion in general, as well as in relation to specific religious traditions. Theories about religion, and the academic study of religion broadly speaking, also play a part in the social construction of religion (Dubuisson 2003; Dressler et al. 2011). Accordingly, reflexivity concerning their own implication in the reification of religion ought to be a methodological sine qua non for scholars of religion. This still leaves room for the question, to be addressed below, as to whether it is useful to distinguish between etic and emic kinds of knowledge.

II.II   *Radical Constructivist Approaches: Religion Exists only as Discourse*
SCR cultivates a strategic distance from realism and anti-realism. This distance is grounded in an epistemological delimitation of reality as *social* reality. It is this

epistemological approach that anti-realists, realists, and post-constructivists object to from their particular points of view. With regard to the study of religion, I understand as anti-realism—or non-realism, the term preferred by Kevin Schilbrack (2017)—the position of those who deny the existence of "religion" outside of the discourse about it. I characterize as realists those who presuppose that there is a reality of religion beyond the discourse on religion. Under this broad banner of realism exists still much space for dissent with regard to the ontic status of reality (see Kneer 2009:11-15). The spectrum ranges from soft constructivist positions at one end to naturalist and materialist positions on the other.

One of the standard bearers of the anti-realist constructivist approach to the study of religion is Russell McCutcheon. For more than two decades a prolific writer on the topic, he has established himself as a leading meta-theoretician of the study of religion. McCutcheon untiringly points to implicit and explicit cases of essentialism in scholars' understanding of religion which for him constitute transgressions against the (radical) constructivist paradigm. For McCutcheon (1997), the major aim of religious studies should be analysis of how religion is created, conceptualized, designed, or "manufactured". I certainly agree with the importance of the constructivist perspective as an approach that sheds light on the processes through which religion continues to be reified (Dressler et al. 2011; Dressler 2013). Hence, McCutcheon and William Arnal (2012:3) have "questioned the seemingly commonsense presumption that there is such a thing in the world called religion, that it takes different forms in different regions and eras, that it is a feature of all human beings, and that it is inherently or properly distinguishable from that nonreligious thing that goes by the name of politics, the secular, the profane, or, simply put, the mundane."

McCutcheon and Arnal (2012:5) are interested in the reification of the concept religion and concepts directly related to it in past and present "rather than assuming that the category *has* content and seeking to specify what that content is" Arnal (2000:30). However, I concur with Schilbrack (2017:175) that it would be a pity if religious studies were to limit itself to analysis of processes of construction, while totally abandoning the study of the products of this construction. McCutcheon and Arnal do not argue this explicitly, but the model of religious studies that in particular the former endorses says little about how we could study the "religious" products of world construction (cf. Benavides 2000:117-118). Upholding a strict emic/etic distinction, Arnal and McCutcheon argue (2012:6) that scholars of religion should use the term "religion" only to the extent that it appears in their ethnographic material as an emic description, but "drop the term altogether when they move beyond mere description, for scholars will no longer assume that their

research subjects' self-reports are somehow in lockstep with the social facts on the ground."

I suggest that recourse to SCR may help to subvert the deadlock between realist and anti-realist, (de)constructivist positions. If we conceive of religion as the product of social construction then there is neither a need to specify religion theoretically, nor a need to limit oneself to its deconstruction. Religion can then simply be conceived as a set of knowledge produced in response to specific questions within the dialectical dynamics of SCR. This is predicated on SCR's epistemological caution with regard to ontology: "The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analysed" (Berger et al. 1991:34).

It is true that the term "religion" has a history that one ought to be aware of. Postulating a general definition that could be applied to all times and places of human activity seems naive and already amounts to a *sui generis* concept of religion (Arnal 2000:30). I also have sympathy with Arnal and McCutcheon's anti-idealist move (2012:9) when they argue that one should not naively imagine "religion to pre-exist the category 'religion'." They certainly have a point when they underline that it would be wrong to assume that emic concepts are proper reflections of social realities or appropriate terms for etic descriptions. However, it is also legitimate to ask why we should limit our attention to what exists in terms of what is manifested in language. Reducing the question of religion or not-religion to a matter of linear temporality within a linguistic ontology—"religion" only comes into "existence" through the category of religion—would deprive us of the possibility to form an analytical category religion. I therefore think that the question of the existence of religion, shared by realists and anti-realists alike, is not a productive one for empirical research. The disclaimer at place here is that I am not a philosopher, but interested in social and historical phenomena. Productive is, however, to ask whether a particular notion of religion as an analytical category is helpful in deciphering—that is, making legible—social and historical contexts.

A lot of stimulating scholarship exists that critically engages with "religion" as both an analytical category and as social reality.[10] Religion as an analytical category can be useful to address, be it for comparative or historical purposes, social structures and material phenomena that can be detected in particular contexts independent of the existence of an emic concept of religion therein (see also Schilbrack 2012 and 2017). Comparative work in the sociology of

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10   One prominent example of which is, as shown by Schilbrack (2017), the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.

religion, for example, requires analytical categories, no matter whether it addresses macro- or micro-sociological questions. This does not necessarily require explicit definitions of religion such as Tweed's, discussed below. As a matter of fact, Tweed himself does not suggest his definition to be general, but more modestly describes it as a "positioned sighting"—even if he suggests that his definition might also be of heuristic use for the investigation of other empirical fields (Tweed 2006:54). While comparative projects can do without explicit definitions, they cannot do without implicit definitions that chart the territories of what is to be compared. I am not a comparativist, and my own work focuses largely on religion as discourse, but I find counterproductive dogmatic rejections (realist or anti-realist) of the meaningfulness of employing religion as an analytical category since foreclosing potentially fruitful debates on how to engage with religion as a social manifestation.

To repeat, most scholars of religion are more interested in the construct of religion as empirical reality—or as a social formation, to use the term preferred by McCutcheon—than in the process of its construction. This appears to boost McCutcheon's eagerness (2015:122-123) to unmask hidden forms of essentialism in academic work that would purportedly be critical of the category "religion", but in fact betrayed its scientific stance by continuing to use the adjective "religious" in a naive way. He argues that

> if … our attention was directed toward the way in which some scholars are confident that the thing they call religion is indeed real in the so-called believer's mind, then, much as Jean-François Bayart … recommends studying not identity but the prior identification practices that made this thing called identity appear so anthropologically and psychologically real in the first place, we would then study the continual constitution and reconstitution of just this part of the world as religious, as real, as authoritative, in the very act of using the term.
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> MCCUTCHEON 2015:124

However, if we assume that religion exists as intersubjectively objectified social reality it does not become evident why we should restrict ourselves to the analysis of the discursive reification of that reality. Additionally, while it is important to point to the role of scholars in the formulation of the modern concept of religion,[11] too narrow a focus on the scholarly side of the

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11   Tweed, too, puts the focus on the role of scholars in the production of meaning, reminding us of J. Z. Smith's assertion that "religion" "is created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define" (Tweed 2006:33).

religion-making enterprise neglects the creative force of appropriations and (re)makings of religion by a variety of non-scholarly, political, and "religious" actors (Dressler et al. 2011; Hurd 2015; cf. Bergunder 2014:254-255).

Another author who has recently launched a radical constructivist critique against *sui generis* approaches within religious studies scholarship is Kocku von Stuckrad. Von Stuckrad attributes particular importance to language and communication in the constructivist process.[12] In his recent book *The Scientification of Religion*, he advocates a discursive constructivism that draws on the sociology of knowledge with a post-structuralist and especially Foucauldian twist. Von Stuckrad's interest in postmodern critiques of scientism demarcates a difference from McCutcheon, who also draws on Foucault and nominally subscribes to a post-modern epistemology, but at the same time displays positivist inclinations more in resonance with modernism (see Arnal 1998:66; cf. Benavides 2000).

Von Stuckrad puts the focus on structures of power in the production of knowledge with particular attention to history and genealogy.[13] Obviously, knowledge is always historically situated and thus we have to analyze discourses, and the concepts that they produce by explaining them from within the particular formations of power in which they are embedded. From the radical constructivist viewpoint, with its focus on language and communication, discourses on religion "produce meanings and orders of knowledge that materialize in concrete practices and institutions" (Stuckrad 2014:14). This Foucauldian approach, which aims to decipher the "societal organization of knowledge about religion," has become a vital tool in the critical study of religion.

Like McCutcheon, von Stuckrad is primarily interested in the implication of modern scholarship in the establishment of knowledge about religion: "The discursive organization of knowledge about religion in secular environments is what I call the 'scientification of religion'" (Stuckrad 2014:180). Contrary to McCutcheon, however, von Stuckrad's questioning of knowledge production on religion leads him to reject the distinction between academic and amateur

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12   His approach should, however, not be confused with the "communicative constructivism" introduced by Hubert Knoblauch, which is firmly anchored in SCR (Knoblauch et al. 2004; Knoblauch 2013a).

13   The genealogical approach developed by Foucault drawing on Nietzsche, a variation of which has through the work of Asad become influential in the study of religion, is interested in subverting mono-linear historical knowledge with focus on the intrinsic relation between power and subject-formation (see Saar 2008). For a recent innovative attempt to sketch the possibility of engaging with history from a discourse analytical perspective drawing on Foucault and Laclau, see Bergunder (2014).

knowledge, and the meaningfulness of the emic/etic distinction in ways that echo with post-constructivism as discussed below; he himself relates it to Latour's actor-network-theory (Stuckrad 2014:181). Von Stuckrad denies that the emic/etic distinction could be analytically useful since it would itself be part of discourses that are (reflective of and) invested in particular interests and formations of power. Binary distinctions such as emic/etic, East/West, science/pseudo-science should be analyzed as tools that create identities and networks of knowledge. As such, he argues, such distinctions should be object of critical analysis, rather than its means (Stuckrad 2014:181; cf. Dressler 2013:220-227).

Contrary to a theory of action approach such as SCR, which presupposes the emic/etic distinction, in discourse-centered radical constructivist approaches agency is engendered by discourses themselves. The privileged attention to communication and discourse marks a stark difference from SCR, in which the processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization are equally weighted and form a dialectic continuum (Berger et al. 1991:149). According to SCR, communication is a social phenomenon that is as such bound to individual agents, their consciousness, intentionality, and sociability (Knoblauch et al. 2004:132). SCR bears therefore a crucial difference from Foucauldian discursive approaches, which are skeptical with regard to the freedom of human agency, stressing instead the dependency of human agency on discursive formations outside of itself (Schrode 2016:189-190). In von Stuckrad's work it is the "social environment" that is formative in the establishment of discourses. McCutcheon theorizes individual agency as secondary to existing "social formations" (closer to Durkheim than to Weber in this respect):

> [A] thoroughly social theory of religion posits individual actors' intentions, plans, and organizations not as *causes* of but as *artifacts* that result from social formation, as the evidence of preexistent, commonly shared intellectual and material conditions beyond the scope or control of the individual. In fact, it is only in light of such preexistent conditions that one gets to count as an individual in the first place.
>   MCCUTCHEON 2001:27

Radical constructivist approaches such as those of McCutcheon and von Stuckrad may be understood as a modification of SCR's triangular dialectic (externalization-objectification-internalization) in that they take the process of internalization as the starting point of analysis, thus relativizing individual and collective agency. Consequently, they step outside a theory of action approach.

While I recognize the important critique that radical constructivist approaches of the kind offered by McCutcheon and von Stuckrad provide for unmasking essentialism in the study of religion, I am not satisfied with the self-limitation that their approaches engender. Students of religion should be able to address not only the discourses that sustain "religion", but also the social, historical, and embodied structures against the backdrop of which these discourses unfold. What I have in mind are conventions regarding comportment (habitus), material formations and artifacts, spatial orderings, traditions of performance and listening, aesthetic sensibilities, and embodied practices—in short, structures and traditions that are not unrelated to, but also not exhausted by language. I think it would be impoverishing if we were to totally discard notions of historical structure that enable us to discuss social, embodied, and material continuities (and discontinuities).

Let me exemplify the issue drawing on Asad's concept of tradition that he first articulated in *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (1986), a text that "might be read as a response to the anxiety provoked in anthropology after the linguistic turn" (Iqbal 2017:195). Therein, Asad first formulated "the idea of Islam as a discursive tradition, in which questions about the interconnections between language, embodiment, and time (historical, experiential, generational, unidirectional, ephemeral, recursive, cumulative, etc.) can be formulated" (Asad in Iqbal 2017:198). For Asad, "[t]radition is primarily about practice, about learning the point of a practice and performing it properly and making it part of oneself, something that embraces Mauss's concept of *habitus*" (Asad 2006:234). This take on tradition, product of his engagement with both Foucault and the work of Alasdair Macintyre, allows a conceptualization of temporality as the place where disciplinary practices and textual discourses are transmitted, negotiated, altered. Tradition is thereby not imagined in terms of continuities, but in terms of ruptured relations in particular presents to therein experienced pasts, and imagined futures.[14] Criticizing Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Asad lamented that "he does not see that there are

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14   "In tradition, the 'present' is always at the center. If we attend to the way time present is separated from but also included within events and epochs, the way time past authoritatively constitutes present practices, and the way authenticating practices invoke or distance themselves from the past (by reiterating, reinterpreting, and reconnecting textualized memory and memorialized history), we move toward a richer understanding of tradition's temporality ... [A]gents consciously inhabit different kinds of time simultaneously and try to straddle the gap between what Reinhart Koselleck ... calls experience and expectation, an aspect of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous." (Asad 2003:222-223).

such things as structures of devotional practices, disciplines for cultivating religious virtues, and the evolution of moral sensibilities within changing historical circumstances. He dissolves these things into mere linguistic forms" (Asad 2001:217; Schilbrack 2017:164). Asad's approach thus departs significantly from radical constructivism's focus on discourse as preceding and dominating practice. For Asad, historical meaning/tradition is produced first of all through embodied practices that are, crucially, not secondary to discourse in a causal manner.

It would be wrong to regard the Asadian take on tradition as social-constructivist, although he engages social constructivism in interesting ways. In a recent interview he addressed Robin George Collingwood's distinction between feeling and thinking, which could be brought together in terms of a "socially constructed experience", while maintaining "a skeptical view of empiricism, the methodology that assumes there is something pure and foundational called individual experience on which knowledge of the external world ("reality") is based" (Asad in Iqbal 2017:209-210). I suggest that thinking this conceptualization of experience in relation to history, with Asad's notion of tradition in mind, opens up the possibility to inquire into history as a plane within a social constructivist framework (cf. Schilbrack 2017:163-164).[15]

As scholars of religion, we need to study the socially constructed reality of religion in its dynamic interplay with other products of human knowledge, and in relation to the embodied, material, and historical dimensions of human life and the environment against which it unfolds. Historical dimensions in particular are difficult to grasp with radical constructivist approaches, since these neither recognize historical structures nor patterns of meaning transmitted over time. The radical discursive position can be helpful in analysis of historiography, but if it gets down to the "raw materials" (or, the "stuff") of religious traditions, that is, to the material plain of texts and edifices, as well as to embodied memories, it remains limited to analysis of the discourses in which these materials are embedded and articulated. This embeddedness should be recognized. It should, however, not prevent us from investigating the social and material embodiments of "religion" (cf. Benavides 2000).

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15   Scott has described (2006:140) Asad's approach as an occupation with "the ways in which historical forms of life, binding experience to authority, are built up over periods of time into regularities of practice, mentality, and disposition, and into specific conceptions of the virtues, and distinctive complexes of values."

III   Transgressing Constructivism

III.I   *Post-Constructivism*

Post-constructivists such as Bruno Latour offer a far-reaching reinterpretation of constructivism. Latour refuses to see agency as a human prerogative and asserts agency of natural things in the process of world construction. Additionally, the "Actor-Network-Theory" that he co-developed negates the difference between subject and object. Individuals and groups, but also natural realities and artifacts had agency, were intricately entangled, formed networks in the formation of reality, and could not be ordered hierarchically in accordance with static object-subject distinctions (Degele et al. 2004:263-268). In the post-constructivist view, both human interpretation and non-human realities contribute to the construction of reality and therefore reality can never be only "social", as for example, SCR epistemology holds. More importantly, in opposition to conventional constructivist thinking, something can only be real as it is being constructed. The juxtaposition between "real" and "constructed" that underpins both realist and anti-realist positions would thus be wrong (Latour 2005:90; cf. Kneer 2009:20-21).

   With his ontological, holistic approach to the "real world", Latour clearly departs from social constructivism. Whereas SCR does acknowledge the existence of a natural/biological/material world independent of the social world (Berger et al. 1991:77-78), it asserts a clear demarcation between the social and the natural: "Social order is not part of the 'nature of things', and it cannot be derived from the 'law of nature'. Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations" (Berger et al. 1991:70). SCR thus denies the possibility of integrating the natural world as an agent in the social construction of reality, while conceding that the social world is created against the backdrop of the natural world. It is at this juncture that post-constructivism and other soft realist positions enter the debate and offer different epistemologies. Anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, for example, has with his work on Peruvian Andean ecologies recently made an intervention that problematizes the subject/object binary in ways that correspond with Latour's project. Discussing interactions between people who "know" and "can do" (conventionally described by outsiders as "Andean Shamans") and *tirakuna* (described by outsiders as "sacred mountains" and by himself as "earth beings"), he argues that earth beings can, in the view of his local interlocutors, not be separated from their name, since they are their names: "no meaning 'mediates' between the name and the being" (Cadena 2015:25). In this view, a clear distinction

between man and nonanimate environment in terms of subject and object is not possible: "judging from the practices that I witnessed … there is no necessary difference between humans as subjects of awareness and places as objects of awareness, for many of the 'places' that Mariano and Nazario 'sensed' were also 'sentient'" (Cadena 2015:101).[16]

Latour's post-constructivism should not be understood as a mere return to phenomenology, which he criticizes (1999:9) for having sharply separated the "world of science" from the "world of intentional stances," hence committing the same error as Cartesian rationalism. From this perspective, which is echoed in Vasquez' contribution to be discussed below, McCutcheon's sharp and generalizing rejection (2014:4-14) of the material turn in the study of religion as merely a return to the idealism of the phenomenological school appears as a discursive reductionism based on a dualist Cartesian stance. Latour vehemently criticizes (1999:277-278) the juxtaposition of belief in reality and belief in constructivism, which he sees as based on the "sharp-cut distinctions between subject and object, science and politics, facts and fetishes" central to the modernist enterprise. He goes so far as to question the very possibility of a social scientific epistemology, on which constructionist perspectives ultimately depend. Epistemology would be based on the modernist "idea of an isolated and singular mind-in-a-vat looking at an outside world from which it is thoroughly cut off…. There is no world outside, not because there is no world at all, but because there is no mind inside" (Latour 1999:296; cf. Kneer 2009:21-23).

Latour further raises the issue of moral relativism. He and others who are unsatisfied with certain anti-realist strands of constructivism lament that these would provide a means to reject the reality of, for example, diseases, ecological problems, war, and other calamities (Stalder 2000; Hacking 2000:3-5). I would agree that constructivism is problematic if we use it to relativize the reality of the ecosystem (and climate change), forms of discrimination, inequality, and violence. While this is a criticism that can be directed against the epistemology of some varieties of anti-realist constructivism,[17] it should, however, not be extended to scr, which clearly recognizes the reality of both the social as well as the natural world (cf. Vasquez 2011:128-129).

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16   For an insightful discussion of the social efficacy of architecture from a theoretical vantage point that aims at connecting structuralist (Durkheim, Mauss, Halbwachs), interactivist (Mead, Goffmann), and poststructuralist (Foucault, Latour) positions see Steets (2015, esp. 17-57).

17   For a rejoinder to this criticism, see von Stuckrad (2014:9).

III.II   *Crossing and Dwelling: Theorizing Positionality*

Compared to the trope of holistic realism employed by post-constructivism, Thomas Tweed's intervention is more modest in scope. Drawing on Hilary Putnam, he characterizes his take on epistemology as a "pragmatic or nonrepresentational realism" (lower case r) in opposition to "metaphysical Realism" (capitalized r). As he explains in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, an often cited recent theoretical works in the study of religion: "My own view of theorizing takes seriously critical theory's highlighting of power relations while it also resonates with some moderate versions of the constructivist view" (Tweed 2006:8). Indeed, the book displays certain confluences with a soft constructivist epistemology. This said, one of the major objections raised by Tweed against existing theoretical approaches, including constructivism, is that they are too static. He advances instead an approach that inscribes tropes of mobility, fluidity, and hybridity into theory itself. Doing so, Tweed conceives (2006:11) of theories as travels that entail (1) "purposeful wandering" and (2) the sighting of sites, or, "positioned representations". Since these sites are not static, positionality should not be misread in terms of indicating a fixed perspective: "our theoretical sightings are always our account of what we can see-and hear, touch, taste, and smell-from where we stand" (Tweed 2006:17). Tweed's notion of positionality marks theoretical positions as necessarily relational to the "particular geographical and social sites whereby scholars construct meaning, using categories and criteria they inherit, revise, and create" (Tweed 2006:18).[18] One could also describe this in terms of a conditional relativism: not in the sense of anything goes, but with an acknowledgement that what we can perceive depends on our location and the focus of our attention (cf. Stuckrad 2014:182).

It is important to remind ourselves of the importance of embeddedness and context, not the least when we remain indebted to a social constructivist approach to religion. The social, political, cultural, and economic positions from where one engages practically or discursively with things that one refers to as religious, or related to the religious create particular perspectives. This is a very basic assumption in the sociology of knowledge in general. Acceptance of our own position within the various academic and non-academic social, cultural, and political fields from which we develop our perspectives is a

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18   Tweed's notion of positionality partially resonates, but does not draw on Helmuth
      Plessner's *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928), in which positionality
      ("Positionalität") relates to the ontological position of man and other animate beings in
      relation to nonanimate environments, questioning the Cartesian distinction between
      outer body and *inner* mind (see Grene 1966).

precondition for assuming a meta-perspective on "religion." This in the end also implies, as Schilbrack has emphasized (2012:115) against Fitzgerald, recognition that "[a]ll thinking is normative or value-laden, and there is no privileged neutral view."

Recognition of our multifaceted positionality is a precondition for any attempt to develop an *open* analytical perspective on religion. I mean a perspective that is not interested, for example, in the fate of "religion" in the modern or the contemporary world per se, but rather in the politics that undergird the complex processes through which religion, its derivatives, as well as conceptual "others" (such as "the secular", cf. Stuckrad 2014:178-180) are authorized and gain evidence as empirical facts and thus matter in specific contexts (see Dressler et al. 2011). Ultimately we cannot pretend to be outside of these politics, cannot claim a bird's-eye view—it is from here that I understand von Stuckrad's rejection of the emic/etic distinction. Any attempt to establish a meta-perspective needs to be able to account for its positionality. The importance that Tweed attributes to the relations of power in which a scholar's theorizing takes place is therefore in place. I concur with Finbarr Curtis, who reasoned (2009:425) that "Tweed's emphasis on social location remains relevant in a field in which the apolitical pursuit of knowledge about religion continues to be what most scholars do in practice, even if they do not frame their work in terms of a positivist ontology."

Tweed's intervention makes for a noticeable contrast to most approaches in a Foucauldian tradition. Analytical approaches that focus on the workings of power through knowledge and discourse are not necessarily oblivious to the role of the observer, but often tend to grant it much less attention. While sympathetic to Tweed's effort to define theory beyond totalizing perspectives as "situated, embodied, open-ended", Vasquez has, however, criticized that the question of power is not sufficiently addressed by Tweed and that in that sense his theory is not critical enough. Building on Foucault, Vasquez laments (2009:435) Tweed's "failure to give widespread dynamics of exclusion and closure their proper epistemological weight." While he lauds Tweed's "emphasis on fluidity, mobility, and hybridity" as "a much needed corrective to [totalizing] readings of globalization," Vasquez misses (2009:438) recognition of the constraints and limitations that shape especially contemporary life-worlds of migrants, who are at the center of both authors' respective ethnographies:

> At stake in today's globalization are not just traces or trails but sharp boundaries, fortified borders, segregated spaces, stipulated and illicit paths, strategies of inclusion and exclusions, and post-colonial practices for generating and managing difference. And while the boundaries and

borders created may be permeable, contingent, and contested, they are binding.

Vasquez' timely insistence (2009:442) on the obligation of the critical scholar to address questions of justice and "to uncover and challenge domination" makes him take a closer look at the material and discursive constraints of contemporary life-worlds. From this, he deduces an ethical imperative that is relevant for reflection on the epistemological grounds of studying religion. Additionally, Vasquez suggests (2009:440) supplementing Tweed's account with notions of network and social field as "good counter-points to the excessive anti-structuralism of hydraulic models."[19] Since religion is produced by individuals within the materiality and constraints of concrete social contexts, praxis and structure are mutually implicative (Vasquez 2009:441).

III.III   *Defining Religion*

Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.

Crossing and Dwelling's strong interest in definitions and in defining as part of theorizing about religion fits with Tweed's general inclination to put the focus on the scholar as crucial site from where to engage with religion. The epistemological basis of Tweed's focus on definition remains, however, somewhat unclear. While his definition and description of religion is all about mobility and fluidity, there are many sentences within the book that can be understood as suggesting a much more static stance with regard to what religion *is*. How should we understand Tweed's concern (2006:59) with "*what religion is* and *what it does*" and his explanation that "spatial metaphors ... signal that *religion is* about finding a place and moving across space, and aquatic metaphors ... signal that *religions are not* reified substances but complex processes" (my emphasis)? All these sentences presuppose a pre-identified object "religion."[20] How does the indicative mood in defining clauses about religion,

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19   Vasquez elsewhere recognizes (2011:303) Latour's actor-network-theory as a kindred project.

20   Cf. Asad's critical remark (2006:215) about Clifford Geertz "interpretation of culture" that "it presupposes an object ('culture as a system of symbols') that trained anthropologists can identify and interpret."

or ascriptions to religion harmonize with a concern with the positionality of the observer and the fluid, hybrid, processual character ascribed to religion? Does the idea of *crossing*, as Ananda Abeysekara has asked (2011:280 n.15), not already authorize "those limits as they are to be crossed, as there can be no crossing without limits?" To be clear, Tweed straight forwardly rejects essentialist and *sui generis* approaches to religion. However, the assumption that religion in principal can be defined as something specific, even if its specificity is captured through tropes indicating processual and dynamic qualities[21]— and with us as scholars merely quibbling about where to exactly draw the lines within a journey shaped by changing perspectives and contexts-deserves further explanation. In other words, the story that he tells seems to be not entirely organized by the pragmatic, non-representational realism that he formally subscribes to, but also carries allusions to a capital r realism that is at odds with the constructivist perspective (see also Hughes 2009).

The question is whether studying religion as a social reality is well served with general definitions of religion. Most constructivist approaches are skeptical of or explicitly reject the usefulness of scholarly definitions of religion, and are rather interested in analyzing processes of defining religion from a meta-perspective.[22] From the SCR perspective, too, there appears to be a tension between Tweed's focus on positionality and the importance he attributes to the definition of religion. If we study what is constructed as "religion" in specific empirical contexts, then we should be interested in how religion is defined in just these contexts. One might accept Tweed's assertion that the place of the construction of religion is the sighting post of the scholar himself as his answer to this problem. However, if seen from that angle, Tweed's approach appears as somewhat redundant: religion is defined, and thus constructed, by scholars, who then study their own positioned constructs. Assuming this is a fair assessment, we have to ask whether this is a convincing and satisfying explication of the study of religion as a scholarly practice. Drawing on SCR, we could alternatively argue that religion does constitute a social reality independent of an individual scholar's perspective. While the scholar's perspective is certainly an important factor that impacts on her inquiry of religion, the empirical reality of religion can nevertheless not be reduced to a mere product of the scholarly perspective either.

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21   Further examples from the book are expressions such as "religions are flows," "each religion is a flowing together of currents," "religion is about settling in and moving across," "[r]eligions are always both solitary and social" (Tweed 2006:59, 60, 77 and 64).

22   In the discourse-centered constructivism of von Stuckrad (2014:13-14), for example, religion is rejected as a useful analytical concept in a way that is reminiscent of Talal Asad (2003:189; 2006:215-216).

My criticism of Tweed notwithstanding, I recognize the heuristic impor-
tance that working definitions based on the inductive method may have for
specific research contexts. Tweed's emphasis on definition may be understood
as a means to reflect on the scholarly construction of religion as part of the
social construction of religion in a particular context. The practice of defini-
tion can thus be taken as an ongoing project that is never settled since it is an
expression of an intellectual endeavor that is not interested in creating sta-
ble or static theories, but dynamic and changing ones in relation to the fluid
realities of the social world, while recognizing with Vasquez the limits of this
fluidity as set by physical and discursive formations of power. Recognition of
positionality and contextuality undermines the possibility of an independent
observer's bird's-eye view and thus of totalizing theory.

Different from Tweed's inductive approach, radical constructivists like
McCutcheon argue vehemently for a deductive approach that necessitates
the definition of religion as a precondition for researching it (McCutcheon
2014: Introduction; McCutcheon 2015).[23] This is a widespread pragmatist posi-
tion, shared also by other prominent scholars, such as, for example, J. Z. Smith
(1998:281-282). In the same line of thought, Ivan Strenski has elaborated on the
necessity of defining religion against what I would claim is a stark misread-
ing of Asad, a misreading that is, however, instructive for this essay's interest
in a reflective constructivist approach. According to Strenski (2010:136), Asad
would on the one hand take an "eliminationst" position, denying that religion
would have any essence and mean anything "objective" in the world. While
Asad's critique of essentials and universals should make him totally refrain
from using the term religion and its derivatives, he nevertheless continued
to use the term religion. This would bring Asad "in deep theoretical 'trouble,'
since these two discourses cannot be reconciled" (Strenski 2010:137).

From the vantage point of this article, Strenski's approach seems misguided.
There is no principal tension between understanding the discourse on religion
as part of a socially-constructed reality on the one hand, and a genealogical
approach that is interested in the contingencies that led to the historical for-
mation of the concept of religion on the other. Using the term religion and its
derivatives does not necessitate a specific assumption with regard to religion's
universal validity and/or essence, and neither does it require subscription to a
particular definition of it as an analytical category. Asad writes (2003:16) against
analytical definitions of religion since such definition is in contradiction to the
genealogical project, understood "as a way of working back from our present to

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23   On the contested issue of the definition of religion, very much constitutive of the field of
      the study of religion, see also Arnal (2000); Bergunder (2014).

the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties." Strenski misses two things. First, a meta-discourse on "religion", such as Asad's genealogy, can certainly refer to the socially constructed knowledge about religion without betraying its cause of delineating the contingencies that engendered that knowledge. Second, Asad's genealogical approach to religion can not be discussed without taking account of the importance he attributes to tradition, as discussed above. Tradition and the social and embodied structures it refers to operate in Asad's thinking as the dialectic other in relation to which he sets up his genealogical work (see Scott 2006:144-145).

III.IV *"The World Is not just Language" (Vasquez): Bringing the Material Turn in Conversation with Constructivism*

> [M]an's experience of himself always hovers in a balance between being and having a body.
> BERGER ET AL. 1991:68

Vasquez has recently formulated an innovative attempt to bring theoretical discussions in cultural studies as well as in science and science studies to bear on the study of religion. In *More than Belief: A Material Theory of Religion*, he aims to theoretically anchor the material turn in the study of religion by developing a framework that integrates constructivist and materialist perspectives and that in this way tries to overcome what may seem as schism between seemingly incompatible epistemologies. Vasquez proffers "a sort of materialism that, while recognizing the material constraints and possibilities entailed by our being-in-the-world through our physical bodies, does not reduce all experiences and cultural productions to the dynamics of the brain, genes, or evolutionary biology." Instead, he subscribes to a cultural realism that assumes that "[s]elves and culture are material in their own right. They acquire their distinctive materiality through social practices that mediate how we experience the world and our own embodiment" (Vasquez 2011:6). For Vasquez, cultural realism differs from Durkheim's idealist relating of social facts and collective representations. It refers not only (1) to shared meanings and values expressed by public systems of symbols, but (2) to spatio-temporal institutions and environments that regulate the behavior of bodies, (3) to embodied dispositions to act in certain ways, and (4) to the differential circulation of capital, commodities, and cultural artifacts in social fields laden with power (Vasquez 2011:6-7). Vasquez in this way challenges (2011:14) the reductionism of discursive constructivist approaches and insists, reminiscent of Benavides, that the world "is not just language." With Susan Bordo, Vasquez

criticizes (2011:150) the exclusive focus on text/discourse as the spring of social reality, exemplified in radical ways for example by Judith Butler, as a "discourse foundationalism" that regards the body as "a tabula rasa, awaiting inscription by culture."

In his attempt to bring matter in general, and the body in particular, into conversation with constructivist approaches, Vasquez—similar to Latour—relates to and distinguishes his own approach from phenomenology. For Latour (1999:9), phenomenology's attention to "the world's rich and lived texture" was hampered by an impoverished conception of the world, "entirely left to humans, absolutely divorced from what things are in and for themselves." Vasquez' criticism is more modest.[24] As Latour, he draws positively on phenomenology's focus on embodiment and emplacement, but departing from Latour, he still remains in conversation with social constructivism. This for him is not only a logical, but a necessary move: "Since becoming with and among others is a vital dimension of embodiment and emplacement, social constructionism is central in any integral materialist approach to religion" (Vasquez 2011:173).[25]

Vasquez' endeavor to reintroduce matter (biology and ecology) into our theorizing of religion is anchored in a critique of (1) Cartesian dualism's strict distinction between mind and body, or, discourse and matter, and (2) the excessive textualism emanating from it, which he perceives as a threat "to turn social constructionism into another version of idealism that glibly dismisses the embodied, sensorimotoric dimensions of religion" (Vasquez 2011:13). In some ways, this criticism resonates with the interventions of Asad and Latour discussed above. Against the view that the body is merely "a kind of blank slate that is marked and molded by history and culture," Vasquez argues (2011:245), drawing on anthropologist Jean Camaroff, that "the body is active, with its physiological realities, such as birth, death, and sickness, not only establishing the limits of the possible but also providing metaphors to frame cultural production." He thus sketches "a social constructionism that allows for the body's multiple materialities, materialities that are surely encountered through but can not be exhausted by discourse" (Vasquez 2011:147).

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24   Vasquez (2011:69-77) shows sympathy to Heidegger's ontological turn that needed to be credited for reintroducing the body, time, and space into phenomenology.

25   Vasquez (2011:123) does not explicitly distinguish between social constructionism and social constructivism and uses the former term as "an umbrella term that characterizes diverse approaches sharing the epistemological assumption that our experiences and practices are unavoidably shaped by the contexts that we collectively construct."

With its urge to recognize a material reality beyond discourse, Vasquez' position may at first sight seem to bear some resemblance to critical realism as expressed for example by Schilbrack (2012; 2017:166-170) and Veit Bader. While Schilbrack remains within a constructivist framework, Bader argues (2001:255) explicitly against constructivism and for "*causal capacities* of culture (or language) to structurate cultural practices (or speech acts)". Bader attempts to sketch a balanced account of the human capacity of world-making against the backdrop of social and natural structures. This echoes Vasquez' caution against epistemological reductionism and especially radical constructivist and essentialist positions. Vasquez, too, argues (2011:6) that "identities and cultural artifacts have causal efficacy", an idea that radical constructivists strongly reject (see Baumann 2001). However, in opposition to the structuralism inherent to Bader's notion of active culture and its Cartesian bias, Vasquez is after a more dynamic conceptualization of the relationship between mind and material:

> [R]eality is always mediated by our practices and cognitive categories, but it is not totally reducible to them. There is a recalcitrant material (i.e., bodily and environmental) surplus that makes possible the emergence of the practices and cognitions with which we engage in the world.
>   VASQUEZ 2011:129

Vasquez' materialist intervention reinvests the material world with significance in the process of world construction. This challenges SCR and even more so radical constructivist approaches, for whom the agency of the body and the materiality of practices are secondary to the social process and discourse. Crucially, Vasquez does not position (2011:84) the realm of language and discourse as opposed to the material realm, but drawing on material feminist scholars Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, as well as science studies scholars Andrew Pickering and Latour, conceives of language as a "form of material agency" that is crucial for his call "to avoid semiotic reductionism and to engage in a holistic exploration of the diversity of practices that constitute religion as a constructed yet lived category."

For the purpose of this essay I would like to highlight the notion of contextuality, which I extract from Vasquez' account when he argues (2011:8) for an approach to religion "as the open-ended product of the discursive and nondiscursive practices of embodied individuals, that is, individuals who exist in particular times and spaces". In contrast to Tweed, Vasquez does not attempt to define religion, but taking a pragmatic-nominalist approach in harmony with constructivism, recognizes as religion that which is recognized and articulated as religion by practitioners and observers. Contextuality I here understand as

metaphor that points to a materially and discursively constructed reality, that is, an approach to social reality that takes under consideration the mutual implications of the material and the social.[26]

IV   Conclusion

While acknowledging the important work of anti-realist methodologies in unmasking essentialist discourses, this essay has been guided by a suspicion of the totalizing potential of reductionist approaches (be they discursive, materialist, or functionalist). More, it has been stimulated by endeavors to epistemologically account for the material dimensions of reality as affecting social reality. As for the ontological status of religion beyond constructivism, the article has drawn on cultural realism, which assumes that social and historical structures are not secondary to knowledge about them, and therefore cannot be reduced to mere products of discourse.

Why do I then think it worthwhile to not totally disregard social constructivism? This has as much to do with ethics as it has to do with scientific reasoning. It reflects my own belief in the cultivation of a critical attitude understood in terms of scholarly responsibility to point to the dynamics of domination in the life-worlds that we shape and inhabit. It is true that SCR did not talk explicitly about power in the social processes through which knowledge is objectified and has in fact been criticized for being indifferent with regard to politics (Knoblauch et al. 2016:55-57). However, the dialectical character of knowledge production offered by SCR provides us with a tool to analyze the interrelatedness of knowledge and power in the social world. This can well be connected to a Bourdieusian critique of the dynamics of domination and exclusion that structure social fields. Such critical constructivist epistemology has been crucial for undermining the totalizing discourses of modern ideologies such as nationalism, secularism, communism, or neo-liberalism, as well as homogenizing concepts such as sex, religion, the market, and race. This potential to mobilize critique is weakened as one moves into the anti-realist direction, which can be used to advocate relativist and cynical positions concerning power inequalities and domination. At the same time, however, this critique needs to be self-reflective, aware of the position from where it is directed. From this angle, focused reflection on positionality and contextuality, as offered by

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26   Vasquez, unfortunately, does not offer reflection on how his cultural realism could be brought to bear on historical work on religion that relies on the heuristic assumption of structures (social, embodied, material) over time.

Tweed and Vasquez, respectively, are helpful to position our own gaze within the fields that we study and in doing so are part of. Reflexivity needs to extend to our basic epistemological assumptions, our theoretical concepts, our methodology, as well as the power dynamics in which our research and writing is situated.[27]

Both post-constructivism and forms of cultural realism such as Vasquez' demand consideration of the implications that sensual and material dimensions of human existence and biological environments have on the social construction of reality. Does it, in light of the relative silence of SCR on the role of the body and materiality in the formation of the social, make sense to hold on to the SCR perspective? Knoblauch and Wilke have recently made a case (2016:65-66) for the inclusivity of SCR, arguing that, contrary to the insinuations of post-constructivism, it would be an attempt to overcome the subject-object distinction and would provide more space for embodiment and materiality than generally recognized. They seem to argue that the tent of SCR can integrate even post-constructivist approaches, which put more focus on the body/material, as well as discourse theories (see also Knoblauch 2013b).[28] Knoblauch has himself suggested (2013a) a focus on communication as nexus between discursive and materialist approaches.

Writing well before the material turn in the social sciences, Berger and Luckmann did not explicitly acknowledge (Berger et al. 1991:26) issues concerning embodied and material contextuality as central concerns of their sociology of knowledge. They relegated the related questions about such issues to the realms of epistemology and methodology, which they attributed to the field of philosophy and not sociology. However, Berger and Luckmann did not conceive of SCR as a theory, but as a sociology of knowledge approach that as such can be useful for various theoretical enterprises that pay attention to the formation of knowledge and sociological reality. They thus might have had sympathies with reinterpretations of their work in the inclusive mood offered by Knoblauch and Wilke. It is not incidental that SCR has proven quiet

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27 For an insightful discussion of the "hierarchies of literacy" between researcher and researched (exemplified in the distinction between "my knowledge" and "their belief") and the practices of inclusion and exclusion through which "self" and "other" are reified in anthropological work see de la Cadena (2015:14-20).

28 Steets, in her discussion of the social efficacy of buildings, similarly argues (2015:56, 245-246) that it is possible to give more consideration to materiality in the process of world construction without abandoning the social constructivist dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

adaptable to a variety of specific theoretical concerns, some of which were discussed in this article.

It is my modest hope that the suggestion of this essay to focus on epistemological presuppositions as a compass to navigate differing approaches in the study of religion will be found useful by some readers. My argumentation was predicated on the assumption that we need to understand religion, its derivatives, and its "others" as socially constructed realities that are constantly negotiated, dissolved, and remade. It is from this vantage point that I sympathize with Vasquez when he assures us that there is data for religion. We can identify this data in "the relatively stabilized and binding discourses, practices, and institutions co-created by religious practitioners, the scholars who study them, and the cultural producers at large" (Vasquez 2011:9). Benavides goes even further (2003:896) when he urges us to go beyond discourses to "discern sets of [biological, cognitive, ultimately evolutionary] constraints … that give rise to the cluster of practices and representations labeled as 'religion' and which also constrain in some ways the theories that seek to make sense of that religion." How to analyze the products of the social construction of religion in the context of their specific environments and in light of the limitations of the reach of constructionism, which are posed by recalcitrant geographical as well as biological "raw materials", is one of the specific tasks of the study of religion (Benavides 2000:116-117). Context is crucial and we therefore need to focus on the various locations, with their specific micro-dynamics, in which knowledge about religion and related concepts such as the secular is produced, reified, and contested. Recognition of this contextuality needs to go together with reflection of our positionality in relation to the context from which we do our "sightings" (Tweed) of religion. With these precautions we should be well equipped to analyze not only the process of the construction of religion, but also the life that the products of this construction take on in terms of the discourses, social institutions, material formations, as well as bodies that carry them.

Acknowledgments

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