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Raschke - Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium - JCRT 1.1
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A consensus is growing these days that the study of religion as an academic field is bearding its worst crisis since its emergence in the late 1960s. The root causes of the crisis are deep and long-germinating. While some observers focus on the familiar whipping boy of reduced support for the humanities and the corporatization of higher education, a highly visible clique from the social sciences have begun to flail the study of religion for its allegedly covert “faith” agenda and its lack of “scientific” rigor. The diagnosis of what is fundamentally wrong, however, runs far deeper.

2. The rise of religious studies as a “discipline” in the last generation was propelled largely by theologians and philosophers, who sought to traverse the boundaries between “confessional” or “sectarian” approaches to religion, comparativism, and classical anthropology. In a nutshell the birth of the field can be described as a timely merger of interests among the followers of Paul Tillich, the disciples of Mircea Eliade, and the admirers of Clifford Geertz. The growth of a pop, post-Christian spirituality among the baby boomers—later incarnated as the curious, contemporary syncretism we know as the New Age movement—fueled student interest. In short, religious studies from its inception was a consortium of disparate intellectual agendas responding to an historically contingent set of market conditions. The inherent conservatism and glacial rate of change within traditional post-secondary learning has sustained these consortial relations now for several decades. Yet, in the same way that once vibrant neighborhoods reach a point of decline where they cannot be resuscitated without a plan of sweeping redevelopment, so the academic study of religion cannot survive much longer under the present circumstances.
3. While a commitment to cultural and religious pluralism has become the established norm within the field, defining once and for all the scope of what we mean by “the study of religion,” the polymethodological character of its scholarly work has become a severe, and onerous, liability. Polymethodology, or methodological pluralism, is by no means unheard of, or even unusual, within the social sciences and humanities. Academic psychology, for example, runs the gamut from the “hard science” of neuro-psychiatry to the pastoral and quasi-religious forms of clinical and counseling therapies. Even philosophy spans the interminable, and seemingly unbridgeable, divide between Anglo-American empiricism and Continental phenomenology. But the latitudinarianism native to well-established modes of inquiry such as psychology, sociology, or literary criticism differs from the fragmentation of perspectives and purposes that afflicts religious studies. There is a much wider gulf between the mythography of a Jungian analyst and the ethnography of a “South Asian religions” specialist than between, say, a cultural anthropologist and an archaeologist. A loose thread of coherence binds the various strategies of “empirical” inquiry into the realm that constitutes “anthropological” subject matter. The existence of these affiliate structures of investigation is tacitly acknowledged by the suffix “-ology”, as in the word anthropology.
4. It is significant that such a suffix has never been added to the word “religion,” though the phrase “religiology” is both orthographically and stylistically convenient. The fact that this phrase was never coined, or at least attained an acceptable level of use, during the infancy of the field, is more remarkable than it has appeared at first blush. There were at the time, of

course, and still are, “departments of religion,” but this nomenclature betrayed what kinds of academic enterprise such rough beasts were indeed—departments that taught religion from the standpoint of a certain broad faith commitment, if not advocacy. The convention among the field’s practitioners of converting the word “religion” to its adjectival counterpart and inserting the inchoate expression “studies” also suggests, almost by way of Freudian indiscretion, what the aim was from the beginning.

5. The founding of the field of religious studies was in actuality, even if it were not so recognized by its adherents, an attempt to pluralize the dominantly Christian—and by and large Protestant Christian—confessional community by introducing competing types of “sectarianism” masquerading as the study of what Robert Ellwood has called “alternative altars,” or non-Western traditions. From the beginning religious studies was a strategy of “de-regulating” and opening up to global competition the praxis of theological espousal. Religious studies never aimed to be a “science” in the sense that even the “human sciences” could be regarded as such, i.e., as a focused and unified means of finding commonality amidst heterogeneity. Religious studies was in itself a semi-conscious, deconstructive move against Protestant thinking, all the while remaining bound to the Protestant, pietistic, and anti-hegemonic norms of its Protestant predecessors. In short, what religious studies, in contrast to most humanities “disciplines,” excluding so-called “area studies”, has decidedly lacked is *theory*.
6. The shyness of religious studies researchers toward elaborating broad, theoretical discourses that might somehow explicate what religion is all about can be accounted for in part as the consequence of the passing in the last generation of what was known as “philosophical theology.” The animus toward “theological” statements by the positivist social sciences has also been a critical factor. But the frequent pretense of religious scholars that they are offering some kind of “objective description” of the beliefs and praxes they have entertained is routinely belied by their refusal to generalize beyond the swatch of cultural materials in question. In other fields even the narrowest trajectories of historicist investigation have drawn upon operative theories. Finally, it could be argued that the refusal to generalize ensues simply from the tendency within a youthful discipline to play it safe politically, and that religious scholars are a notoriously timid lot. However, even this straightforward observation misses the mark, inasmuch as the field in its early phases had a rich reserve of “theoretical” resources that were neither Christian nor theological on which to bank. As it turned out, the movement toward an “anthropology” of religions, which overtook the field in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was inspired by Geertz’s writings, never really gained currency. Nor has the fashion of “cultural and critical studies” in the humanities as a whole made much headway to date among religious specialists of which the general population still consists in historians, ethnographers, and linguists.
7. The rejection of theory by the religious academy stems from the field’s still hidden confessional curriculum. Most scholars of religion are not self-consciously immersed in the business of proselytizing. Nor would the majority of them admit that their insistence on defining their pursuits in terms of a spectrum of competencies in specific “religions” or “traditions” really conceals a calculated system of political “checks and balances” for a preponderance of faith-based promotions. Yet that is the effective calculus in most “departments of religious studies.”
8. The tragedy in recent years has been the almost total eclipse of the philosophy of religion within the study of religion. While the new post-structuralist philosophies spilling out of France in recent years provide a wealth of opportunities for assessing religion in its cultural matrix, those kinds of presentations have been decidedly absent in the examination of religious issues. Even though religion is almost by definition what Jürgen Habermas would term a system of “communicative action,” no effort has been made to deploy the exploding genre of

communication theory in the analysis of religious phenomena. The accumulating ignorance, if not the outright_censorship,_ of theory by the newly arrived power elites in the study of religion can only be rendered intelligible as a half-aware campaign to solve the age-old dilemma of religious sectarianism and ideological conflict by suppressing serious intellectual issues altogether.

9. Theory is dangerous to the power elites in the field because it offers unsettling questions about what religious people actually think and do, and how these modalities of signifying praxis compete and challenge each other. As both Marxists and the sociologists of knowledge discovered a century ago, the passion of religious belief can be an upsetting and de-stablizing force in the world. Whether we are talking about the millennial visions of the Diggers during the Puritan Revolution of the seventeenth century or the Islamically configured tribalism of Chechyan fighters in the present Russia, the capacity of religious fervor to unravel the pragmatic governing arrangements of the political privileged is substantial. Theory, therefore, poses embarrassing considerations of how religious ideologies might in certain instances cast a violent, or disturbing, shadow over the peaceful *imperium* of global civilization seemingly unified under the banner of stock trading and currency arbitrage.
10. The major shortfall in the theoretical analysis of culture in general, and religious culture in particular, has been the loss of a credible strategy of critique with the death of what Jean Lyotard has termed "grand narratives." The collapse of Marxism worldwide as both a form of revolutionary consciousness and a type of post-Christian theodicy has been more significant than many "theoreticians" care to admit. So much of the burden of theory in the last twenty years has been carried by so-called "cultural Marxists" who take their cue not only from Lyotard, but from the writings of Fredric Jameson. It was Jameson who recognized that the key to postmodernity, and postmodernism as a movement in philosophy, the arts, literary criticism, and theological inquiry, lay in what Perry Anderson has called the "de-differentiation of cultural spheres."¹ In the modern period, and with respect to modernism itself as a kind of broad, conceptual *Bild* of the strands of that epoch's culture, the trend was always toward totalization and the varieties of explicit as well as covert fascism - the subsumption of cultural forms by the state, the immanentization of religious life and the spiritualization of both the materiality of labor and the law of exchange. Culture is concealed within the general forms of political theory and historical reflection. Ironically, the sudden implosion of Marxism signalled the liberation of the "cultural principle" from its former prison house of ideology. Whereas Marxism as a modernist strategy of interpretation had always circumscribed its understanding of culture within the dialectics of capital, postmodernism as a type of "post-Marxism" delineated cultural theory not only as separate from political economy, but made it overarching and central.
11. As most observers have pointed out in recent scholarship on the rise of postmodern thinking, the catalyst for the reconceptualization of Marxism was Baudrillard. While the transition among European Marxist theorists during the 1960s and 1970s from the "negative dialectics" of Sartre to the full-blown cultural materialism of Althusser and Gramsci is a complicated story of the failure to comprehend contemporary history adequately, it was Baudrillard who first grasped clearly that the force of capital had mysteriously metamorphosized into the power of the sign. Similarly, for Baudrillard, what Marx had termed the "relations of production" had now been transformed into the semiotics of desire and consumption. Even as the so-called "consumer capitalism" of the post-War era had been exhaustively analyzed by economists, the changeover from nineteenth century modes of social and political reflection

¹Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 62.

had barely penetrated the “humanistic” disciplines. Baudrillard saw, and identified in terms that were far less tendentious and jargonistic than Jameson could have mustered, the symmetry between late capitalism and the explosion of the communications industry. The “cultural logic of late capitalism,” if we may borrow Jameson’s phraseology, is not a logic at all. It is a process whereby the rationality of cultural expressions and subdivisions gives place to what Baudrillard terms the “excrecence” of images and representations in an expanding orgy of signification.

12. At one level, of course, it is possible to read Baudrillard merely as a philosopher who discovered a language to account for commercial advertising, the cult of media celebrities, and the Dionysian character of pop culture. But Baudrillard’s insights are not to be trivialized. In the post-Marxist age the practice of “theory” per se is on the verge of achieving a new currency through the comprehension of all that is “cultural” in its myriad and diverse guises. The explanation is not all that opaque. The “de-differentiation” of the realm of culture itself means the terrain that was heretofore a kind of “plantation” for certain specific ecologies of intellectual inquiry has now become common ground for all the “disciplines.” That de-differentiation has had an especially strong impact on the study of religion. Were it not for methodological “warlordism”—the narrow and inherently self-legitimizing foci of scholarship—that dominates the field today, religious studies would be frolicking in the sunlit fields of cultural analysis. Paul Tillich’s insight that religion is the “form” of culture is more pertinent at the turn of the millennium than it was in the early postwar era.
13. The efflorescence of what is gradually coming to be known as “postmodern faith”—the syncretic, experiential, individualistic, and media-dominated modalities of spirituality that has assumed the somewhat misleading labels of “New Age” religion, or “postdemoninational” Christianity, fulfills Baudrillard’s dicta. Postmodern religion is a vast and de-differentiated circuit of cultural signs and metaphors that do not add up to anything resembling what religious studies scholars in the past have identified as “movements” or “traditions.” Postmodern religion is the motivational underlay of postmodern culture as a whole. Whether we are talking about metaphysical seekers who chant to the “ascended masters” using quartz crystals, or urban Pentecostals who find “gold dust” on themselves after having received “miraculous healings”, or Christian rock singers who can hardly be distinguished in their demeanor or music from other pop musicians, we are no longer entering into some arcane, academic discourse about “dialogue” among Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Christians. We are no longer even talking about “religion” as conventionally construed.
14. The discourse of religion under postmodern conditions adds up to what Richard Murphy terms a “counterdiscourse” that constitutes a whole new theoretical strategy.² Such a counterdiscourse is no longer about the “disciplinary object” we know as religion. It is not “about” anything at all, in fact, but amounts to a second order of simulation—the retextualizing, or developing, of an interpretative code for the play of performances and iconic showings that make up “religious culture.” If, as Baudrillard stresses, a simulacrum is distinguishable from an entity by the fact that its “reality” can be discerned in its replication, then religious studies amounts to a *simulation of the simulacra* that precess autonomically and “chaotically” within the circulatory system of signs that is culture. The study of religion has no “subject matter”—only a sweeping and undemarcated topography over which the theoretical eye may wander. Our theory is what Gary Genosko calls “undisciplined theory,” that is, semiotics.³ But our approach is also something that conventional “religious scholars” have not even

²Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avante-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 272.

³Gary Genosko, *Undisciplined Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

begun to fathom.

15. What exactly is semiotics? Semiotics, which its founder Charles Sanders Peirce termed “semi-ology,” is—simply put—the “science” of signs and sign-operations. Only in the past generation has semiotics matured as a serious area of theoretical endeavor, and its influence to date has been largely felt within interdisciplinary undertakings, such as film studies, media philosophy, marketing research, and art criticism. In order to understand the importance of what could well be characterized as the “semiotic turn” within the theoretical pursuits of the humanities, we must take a look at the way in French post-structuralism, particularly the “deconstructionism” of Derrida and his imitators, has set a new course not only for the philosophy of religion, but for the study of religion in its entirety.
16. The importance of Derrida as a philosopher, historically, is that he fell like an anvil blow on the smug world of Anglo-American analytical philosophy. While Derrida’s early attacks on “logocentrism” has usually been construed as a critique of the later Heidegger, his arguments ironically slashed through the empire of logico-realism that had swaggered in the philosophical academy since Bertrand Russell. “Deconstruction” was never, even by Derrida’s testament or reckoning, a philosophical method. It is those scholars who have made it a kind of method, if not an actual ontology, that have given “deconstruction” a bad name. Deconstruction aimed to demonstrate once and for all by drawing on the new “science” of linguistics that referentiality is a conceit, and the grand philosophical narratives of reference constitute a kind of imperial poison pen. Unmasking this conceit was only the beginning of a longer and more encompassing theoretical project of which even Derrida, unfortunately, has lost sight. Within the gambit of epistemology, the deconstruction of the referent could only ensue as the liberation of the signifier. Once the signifier is loosed from its phantasmal “object” or representation, it is free to become migratory, and hence “semiotic.” The concept of semiosis, which is integral to the approach of “semiotics”, implies nothing more than a mapping of the dynamic interoperability of multiple sign agencies. Insofar as deconstruction turns the tables on the method of “logic” by denying that grammatical constraints are, *contra* Wittgenstein, the boundaries of signification, and that philosophical statements of “meaning” are the perimeter of discourse, so semiotics surpasses all attempts at “deconstructive” countertheorizing by demonstrating that the erasure of presence in the motion of the sign is, in fact, the revelation of the power of the sign itself. If deconstruction is the negation of the ontological, semiotics is the negation of the negation. The sayings of the “semiotic” are what indeed Derrida claimed Heidegger cannot say. Heidegger’s talk about that which is “coming to presence” in language merely consists in a Teutonic mystification of what semiotic science tell us in plainer speech. The *logos* of the new onto-logy, or “theory of being” is not logic; it is the swarm of signification.
17. As scholars we must realize that the way we frame our questions and inferences in “doing what we do” is not some arbitrary choice we make, or some happenstance of personal history whereby we choose to become a “sociologist of religion” as opposed to, say, an intellectual historian. The pervasive problem with the study of religion as a “field” is that it has resolutely and consistently engaged in the “grand refusal”—a refusal to be even minimally theoretical. The hermeticism of a Carl Jung or a Huston Smith, the crypto-sacramentalism of a Mircea Eliade, the anthropologism of a Jonathan Z. Smith—these slants have all conveyed a sense of strategically explaining religious matters for academic curiosity-seekers. But at the same stroke they have proven unable to do what the study of religion with its inherent “ethnographical” proclivities could have done from the outset. They have failed to make manifest the integral and conceptual relationships among the windings and trailways of anthropological findings to such a degree that religious phenomena can be “understood” at a global level rather than simply browsed from a privileged, political vantage point.

18. If “theory”, as the classical meaning of the word intends, signifies the gaze of the theatergoer, the critical viewing eye toward a “performance”, then every “theoretical” statement concerning religion must amount to something far more compelling and discerning than a mere abstract proposition about the “sacred”, the “numinous”, or the “spiritual.” There can be no theory without a dialogue with the signs themselves. And there can be no dance of the signs without the engagement of the theoretician. In the same way that quantum physics revolutionized our notions about scientific “objectivity” almost a century ago by positing the “observer-dependent” character of theory, so a semiotics of religion can overhaul our now historically obsolete habits of taking religion either as something private and confessional, or as a phantasmal castle of Durkheimian “social facts.” Both models are, in truth, empty idealizations. As Peirce first recognized in proposing the “triadic” structure of the sign, as Heidegger discovered at an early stage in the development of the phenomenological method, and as Merleau-Ponty refined in his later sketches for an analytic of the body, “theory”, that is, the philosophical means of seeing, arises from the act of interpretation at that moment of self-revelation when the interpretation of the system of signifying relationships discloses the very “sign” of the interpretant itself.⁴ Theory is the signifying probe or “position” (in Derrida’s ironical sense) that distributes the events of signifying praxis which make up the “phenomenal” order of things. Religion does not, or cannot, stand alone; it is inextricably semiotic in its texture and weave. It is “theory-dependent.”
19. A justification, interestingly, for the study of religion as a kind of “higher semiotics” can be found in the critical method pioneered by the classical form of religious theory that went by the name of “theology.” We, of course, do not have anything resembling “systematic” or “dogmatic” theology, “Christian theology” or “Hindu theology.” The idea that theological thinking can be partitioned off as indications of specific “religious traditions” makes no more sense than the view that biology can be divided methodologically according to the different species under scrutiny. “Theology”, stripped of its ecclesial, doctrinal, or even ethnological trappings simply betoken the “science of the divine,” and that in a broad sense is what religious theory must strive toward. If one examines the different “religions,” one finds that each “tradition” in its own right is “theology-laden.” Though the origins of both science and mathematics are shrouded within their own cultural conditionedness, their theoretical means and aims have been unflaggingly independent of the cultural formations within which they were incubated.
20. Theoretical thinking within the sphere of inquiry we call “religion”, therefore, of necessity must be a semiotic way of thinking. What do we mean by “semiotic” thinking? Semiotic investigation is an essential venture into thinking through the “representational” character of human experience. What do we mean “representation?” Despite the tendency to contort and mystify the word in postmodern philosophy and theology, the concept of “representation” is not all that obtuse. As Jack Goody notes in his examination of the “representational” languages of religion, theater, and art, the concept *au fond* merely implies the broader strategy of mimesis.⁵ Mimetic patterning has nothing to do with replication, or copying, as Plato thought. The “mimetic” is not at any level a reduplication of the “real”. Instead it is a “redrawing”, which in fact brings about a disfigurement at the site of depiction. It is an act of “reference” that in fact overcomes the referent. The “presentation” of the real invariably establishes a synecdochal style of sign-connectivity between the representation of the real, and the real that

⁴For a good discussion of Peirce’s semiotics as analysis of the human “sign” that establishes the sign, see Jorgen Dines Johansen, *Dialogic Semiosis: An Essay on Signs and Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁵Jack Goody, *Representations and Contradictions: Ambivalence Towards Images, Theatre, Fictions, Relics, and Sexuality* (London: Blackwell, 1997).

is represented.⁶ And it is that sort of *archaeo-semiosis* which constitutes the “representational” nature of all language and cognition, a fact that Kant with his interpretation of “phenomenon” as *Vorstellung* (i.e., “re-presentation”) understood quite well.

21. The study of religion is semiotic at its core, because it is not about “words” and “things” as philosophy and logic conveniently regard them. The study of religion is about the way in which the logical and grammatological constraints of the process of representation are removed, yet remain “significant” at the same time. As Genosko observes in his overview of the new cycle of scholarship in both semiotics and cultural studies, the pursuit of the humanities at large is a wandering in the “theater of representation.” And “all representation is theological, a matter of filling gaps.”⁷ When one begins to frame the “theory” of religion as a theory of semiosis, or how the mimetics of representation function *in extremis*, then one can do philosophy of religion, if not “philosophical theology”, in a whole new manner—as *religious theory*. Religion itself is a latticework of sign-functions and signifying elements that transcend the grammatics of common sense. These signifying elements do not coalesce into some kind of metaphysical object, as Durkheim and others have always believed. The mysterious, yet theoretically inconsequential, construct of “the sacred” belies this means of misconstruing the subject regions to which we append the label of religion.
22. The “sacred” has no entitative status, nor does it consist in some kind of affective or “extra-sensory” overlay to ordinary experience. The sacred implies a movement, or even a mutation, of signs whereby the mimetic relationship between the different signifying constituents is entirely asymmetrical. It is this unique asymmetry of religious semiosis, wherein the “object” signified is neither visible nor recognizable in terms of the signifier, that produces the mythical, or the numinous. The performative character of religious action accentuates this movement. When Eliade talks of religious ritual as a re-enactment of sacral events that took place *in illo tempore*, he is speaking in a metaphysical vein of the asymmetry of religious mimesis. Derrida’s original insight that representation is an erasure, not a repetition, of presence can be translated into this scheme of reference. If origin can never be recovered after the act of signification, then the *archaeo-semiosis* that distinguishes religious language is such a complete rupture within the “deconstruction” of the sign that only the discourse of *wholly otherness* is possible. Religious theory is an extension of cultural theory in the measure that it opens up the hinterland of all those representations and signs that can be counted as part of human “anthropology”. To reduce the study of religion to a descriptive anthropology, as has happened largely in the last generation, is not only intellectual cowardice, it is methodological malpractice.
23. It was initially Aristotle, and ultimately Plotinus, who understood that any account or “explication” of phenomena resides in the articulation of the relationship between terms, not as a predicative relationship, but in the ambivalent sense of what Aristotle called *proto ti*, as an aesthetic configuration that evades every logic of equivalency. Plotinus used an expression which Stephen Gersh argues, is the anchor of semiotic procedure itself—*logos tes scheseos*, a “rationality of relation [of difference].”⁸ This rationality of the relationship between what are otherwise perceived as a “disfigured” form of mimesis, as a drawing of strange maps and

⁶This insight was actually discovered by Durkheim. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim notes that the synecdochal relationship between part and whole is the basis of the sense of “sacrality.” “A mere fragment of the flag represents the Motherland just as well as the flag itself. Therefore, it is sacred in the same way and to the same degree.” W.S.F. Pickering, *Emile Durkheim: Durkheim on Religion* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1994), p. 139.

⁷Genosko, p. 151.

⁸See Stephen Gersh, *Concord in Discourse: Harmonics and Semiotics in Late Classical and Early Medieval Platonism* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996).

impossible terrains, is the “theological” charter of religious theory. It is a rationality that is ultimately “heterological” in Bataille’s sense. But it is a rationality nonetheless. Semiology requires the incongruity of “the other.” So-called “scientific anthropology,” on which the study of religion has slavishly modelled itself, has surpassed itself in this generation by recognizing that *to heteron* is not a datum of science, only an affectation. It only becomes “scientific” when it becomes heterological.

24. Religious scholars can celebrate the disparate and the diverse until a dark sun rises on the ruins of an exhausted millennium. But the task of theoreticians is far different.
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Notes