



THEORY FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES

William E. Deal and Timothy K. Beal

ROUTLEDGE New York • London

Published in 2004 by Routledge 270 Madison Ave. New York, NY 10016

Theory 4: a book series from Routledge

<http://www.routledge-ny.com/> Published in Great Britain by Routledge 2 Park Square Milton Park, Abingdon Oxon, Ox14 4RN, U.K. <http://www.routledge.co.uk/>

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.
This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis
or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to
<http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/>.”

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

© 2004 by Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Deal, William E. Theory for religious studies/William E.Deal & Timothy K.Beal. p. cm.—(Theory4) ISBN 0-415-96638-8 (hardcover: alk. paper)—ISBN 0-415-96639-6 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Religion—Study and teaching—Methodology. I.Beal, Timothy K. (Timothy Kandler), 1963–. II. Title. III. Series. BL41.D46 2004 200’.71—dc22 2004013888

ISBN 0-415-96639-6 Master e-book ISBN

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
PREDECESSORS	1
1. Sigmund FREUD	2
2. Karl MARX	6
3. Friedrich NIETZSCHE	11
4. Ferdinand de SAUSSURE	15
THE THEORISTS	20
5. Louis ALTHUSSER	21
6. Mikhail BAKHTIN	25
7. Roland BARTHES	29
8. Georges BATAILLE	34
9. Jean BAUDRILLARD	40
10. Walter BENJAMIN	44
11. Pierre BOURDIEU	49
12. Judith BUTLER	53
13. Hélène CIXOUS	57

14.	Gilles DELEUZE and Félix GUATTARI	60
15.	Jacques DERRIDA	65
16.	Michel FOUCAULT	71
17.	Hans-Georg GADAMER	77
18.	Luce IRIGARAY	81
19.	Julia KRISTEVA	85
20.	Jacques LACAN	89
21.	Henri LEFEBVRE	94
22.	Emmanuel LEVINAS	98
23.	Jean-François LYOTARD	101
24.	Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY	104
25.	Edward W.SAID	108
26.	Gayatri Chakravorty SPIVAK	113
27.	Hayden WHITE	117
28.	Raymond WILLIAMS	122
29.	Slavoj ŽIŽEK	127

INTRODUCTION

Theory for Religious Studies—Who Needs It?

What is theory and why is it important for religious studies?

Theory, from the Greek *theoria*, which means “a viewing” or “spectacle,” offers a way of seeing. A theory is something like a conceptual lens, a pair of spectacles, that you use to frame and focus what you’re looking at. It is a tool for discerning, deciphering, and making sense.

One central question that animates the academic study of religion is “What is religion?” Although the answers to this question are diverse, any answer constitutes a *de facto* theory of religion, that is, an idea of religion that is used to make sense of various beliefs and practices we call religious. Religious studies *is* theory; it is the myriad conceptual tools used to “see” religion.

It has become clear over the past two centuries that the academic study of religion has no GUT, that is, no Grand Unifying Theory that brings into sharp focus all things religious. And it never will. Every theory frames and focuses our attention on some things while leaving other things outside the frame or out of focus. Thus, religious studies is always in search of new theories that might open up new ways of seeing and interpreting religion.

In recent decades, religion scholars have moved beyond their traditional disciplinary boundaries in search of new theoretical perspectives by which to interpret religion. Theories of culture, history, language, and gender that were unfamiliar to most religionists in the past are today reframing and refocusing how we see religion. As a result, the canon of theories and methods important to the academic study of religion has been dramatically transformed and expanded. This situation makes religious studies an exciting and vibrant academic field. Yet it also presents religion students and teachers with significant challenges. These new theories ask innovative questions and reveal novel possibilities for studying and interpreting religion, but they are often difficult to understand. *Theory for Religious Studies* provides concise introductions to the theories of the most prominent scholars outside religious studies whose work has proven important within the field.

We wrote this book with three audiences in mind. First, it is for undergraduate students in courses on theory and methodology for the academic study of religion. Although there are excellent introductions to traditional theories of religion (covering, among others, Tylor, Durkheim, Weber, Otto, Eliade, Turner, and Geertz), there has not been a corresponding introduction to newer theoretical perspectives treated here.

Second, this book is for graduate students. Not only will it serve master's or doctoral students seeking theoretical frameworks for thesis or dissertation research, but it will also prove useful as they prepare for a career in teaching.

Finally, *Theory for Religious Studies* is intended for teachers and scholars of religion who need a resource to help them introduce students to contemporary theoretical perspectives and who are themselves interested in how these perspectives might speak more directly to religious studies.

Genesis

This book had its genesis in the classroom. It has been our experience in teaching courses in academic religious studies that students often find traditional theoretical perspectives on religion relatively easy to grasp. For instance, the modernist notion, identified especially with Durkheim and Eliade, that a sacred/profane dichotomy is foundational to understanding religion poses little difficulty for most students. This is due in part to the fact that the idea of a sacred/profane split has found its way into our “commonsense” understandings about the nature of religion. That there exists a fundamental division between the sacred and the profane seems obvious. Indeed, most Americans would not find it odd to think that some aspects of one's life are lived in the secular, profane world, while other aspects—times of worship and prayer, for example—are set apart as sacred. Further, the binary opposition of sacred and profane parallels other binary oppositions that shape our worldview, such as church and state, right and wrong, and good and evil.

Introducing less commonsensical—often contemporary and explicitly “postmodern”—theories and perspectives is another matter. The conceptual effort required to understand these theories and viewpoints can be quite great. Besides the fact that they often seem to fly in the face of logic, these theories do not necessarily directly address issues of religion and religious phenomena. They also introduce new terms and concepts—such as discourse, representation, subjectivity, gender, ideology, embodiment, and culture—that are unfamiliar to many students and do not at first glance seem to have much to do with religion.

Other than their fashionability, what do these theories offer to the student of religion?

The theories introduced in this book offer fresh perspectives that move us beyond traditional approaches to religion. They raise questions that illuminate the nature of religious practice and thought in ways that require us to see religious phenomena not as isolated texts and events, but as interconnected aspects of culture that both impact and are impacted by the social, the political, the economic, and other human practices.

In its formative years, the study of religion struggled to legitimate itself as a distinct academic discipline alongside other humanities disciplines. The existence of academic

departments of religion at most colleges and universities today is one sign of its success in gaining credibility within the academy. Yet the questions asked and perspectives taken by the founders of academic religious studies now seem dated, based on the intellectual assumptions and interests of previous generations. In general, the humanities and social sciences have taken up new questions and perspectives that embrace both interdisciplinarity and contemporary critical and cultural theory. In 1965 one would have likely read, among others, Mircea Eliade and Wilfred Cantwell Smith for guidance on how to study religion academically. Eliade and Smith are still required reading for students and scholars of religion, but the discipline has been confronted by new theoretical ideas and challenges, and these, too, must be taken into careful account. To this end, *Theory for Religious Studies* introduces some of the key thinkers and ideas that are currently having considerable impact on thinking and writing in the humanities and social sciences generally and in the academic study of religion specifically. Students of religion must enter into dialogue with these new perspectives or risk becoming irrelevant, unable to address the questions and issues concerning religion and culture that are now animating the academy.

Conversations

This book is not only a guide about how theory since the 1960s has transformed the landscape of academic religious studies, but also an invitation to join in the conversation—regardless of the theoretical stance one adopts.

The contemporary theoretical perspectives introduced in this book did not emerge miraculously, *ex nihilo*, from the solitary minds of their authors. They were developed in conversation with those who preceded them. In this regard, four theoretical predecessors are particularly important: Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ferdinand Saussure. Together, these four constitute a common context for theoretical discourse since the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, their concepts and questions continue to set the agenda for contemporary theory. Whether one embraces them or not, one must have a basic understanding of their contributions. Therefore, this book begins with a section on these four predecessors to contemporary theory.

Just as the theorists introduced in this book were engaged in dialogue with their own theoretical predecessors, we invite today's students of religion to be in conversation with the theories and theorists described here. Whether one ultimately declares oneself a Kristevan or Foucauldian or Lacanian—or, for that matter, a Marxist or Freudian or Nietzschean or Saussurean—it is important to attend to the questions these thinkers raise. What happens to our view of religion, for instance, when we question the nature of language? Does language represent a natural correspondence between word and external referent, or, as structuralists would argue, is language a semiotic system in which the linguistic sign is both arbitrary and based on difference? The point is that these critical modes of inquiry allow us to see religion in ways not considered by traditional theories of religion.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be useful. We assume that most readers will not read it from cover to cover, but will go to it for help with particular theorists and theories. The four predecessors introduced in the opening section are presented in alphabetical order by last name, as are the twenty-five entries in the main section. Every entry in the book has three main parts: a list of Key Concepts, the main body of the text, and a Further Reading section.

At the beginning of each entry is a short bulleted list of Key Concepts that we have identified as particularly important for students of religion to understand. These concepts are listed in the order of their appearance in the main text.

The main body of each entry begins with a brief biographical sketch. In the discussion that follows, Key Concepts are highlighted where they are first explained. Thus a reader interested in one particular Key Concept can quickly scan the entry for the discussion of it. We also offer some possible implications for religious studies. We do not indicate all the possible implications, however, as if that were possible. To return to our spectacles metaphor, these theories provide us with new lenses through which to interpret religion. We fully expect that others will discover new and surprising ways of applying them.

Finally, each entry has a Further Reading section that includes two subsections: first, a “By” subsection listing those primary texts we consider particularly important for the study of religion; second, an “About” subsection listing texts about the theorist as well as texts on religion that include a significant discussion of the theorist or application of the theorist’s ideas. Within each of these subsections, one or two key texts are indicated with asterisks. We recommend these as starting points for further reading.

This book suggests multiple possible ways that we might see religion. Although the theorists we explore here are sometimes difficult to understand on first contact, we believe that they are well worth the effort. Our goal has been to provide initial access to their work, to explain their key concepts, and to give direction for further study. As readers move beyond our short introductions to the primary texts, we fully expect that they will develop more complex and subtle understandings of the potential contributions of these theorists to the academic study of religion than we present here. Happy theorizing.