What’s the Difference?
Religion and the Question of Theory

Now if, today, the “question of religion” actually appears in a new and different light, if there is an unprecedented resurgence, both global and planetary, of this ageless thing [. . .]
—Derrida

On the twentieth anniversary of the journal’s publication, the editors of differences have offered the salutary if confounding challenge to consider “the distinction, in this theoretical moment, between what is and what is not theory.” One might expend some energy reflecting on what “this theoretical moment” is—what time it is, theoretically speaking. Having decided to address the question in light of my field of specialization, the academic study of religion, I first find myself poised to respond to the question of “this theoretical moment” in relation to an object so often framed as perennial, timeless, unmoored to temporality itself: “religion.” And yet, in taking up the question of the distinction between what is and what is not theory in this context, I nevertheless find my first footing historically, locating a provisional starting point in questions of definition, those that have plagued the field since its inception in the modern period: What counts as “religion,” and how is it theorized? A second starting point: What counts as “theory” in this context? Is theory about religion, or are there elements of religious thought and performance that simulate or approximate or operate as theory? Can theory, in other words,
be a product of religious practice? And a postscript: What relationship can we imagine between theory and the thing everyone seems to worry about being mistaken for doing, theology? This essay offers a series of observations, not a systematic overview or a sustained conversation with any particular theorist or theoretical problematic. And yet, Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” haunts the proceedings.

Religion circulates in the world, one might say, like an English word that has been to Rome and taken a detour to the United States.
—Derrida

It is a well-worn observation in the academic study of religion that the effort to define the object of study is an impossibility. “Religion,” we have learned, is a heuristic invention, the product of the Enlightenment project and even, as some would have it, the scholar’s study.¹ As Jonathan Z. Smith has put it provocatively, “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define” (193–94). In other words, there is no stable object out there in the world that functions as the clear referent for the word religion as a generic classification. The generic term itself was produced through the experience and observation of difference.

As David Chidester has shown in his masterful book on the colonization of southern Africa (1996), it was the colonial encounter that produced that experience and observation of difference, which then generated a notion of religion as a bounded system, a “thing” or “system” that different cultures and nations possessed in equal or unequal measure. The encounter, however, was not static or univocal, but rather produced distinct and shifting understandings of what “the difference” actually was: in the first instance, Europeans engaged in colonization remarked repeatedly on the purported absence of “religion” among the indigenous peoples they encountered. Closer engagement suggested that there was indeed “religion” there and that it bore an uncanny similarity to the religion of the colonizers; hence, the repeated misapprehension of indigenous religion as a manifestation of some lost version of biblical religion (e.g., understanding the indigenous culture as one of the lost tribes of Israel). As the colonial relationship continued, the European sense of things
changed again: now, indigenous religion lost its frisson of similarity and became once again somehow strange—indeed, not really religion at all, but rather “magic” or “superstition.” The object of observation was the same, but the theoretical and interpretive aperture changed: as a consequence, the indigenous reality went from radical difference (e.g., *no* religion) to uncanny sameness (e.g., *our* religion) to a dangerous in between (e.g., *bad* or *fraudulent* religion). In this process of contact, comparison, and contrast, the category of “religion” itself came to be produced and reified.

Back in the scholars’ studies and university lecture halls of Europe, meanwhile, a different but complementary process of theorization was taking place: on the one hand, “religion” was being theorized in contrast to its others (“magic”/bad religion and “science”/not religion; see Styers); on the other hand, *religion* in the singular, now a theoretical commonplace, was dividing and multiplying, and it was in this process that the idea of “world religions” emerged—still with Christianity at the center as the control or default for theorization and comparison, but allowing for the prospect that there were other species of the genus “religion” besides it (see Masuzawa). Meanwhile, as “religion” as a category gets cordoned off from other elements of human social and cultural and political existence, another element rushes in to fill in the gap: the “secular.” Whether you map things theologically or scientifically, you find very similar structures of thought in place: underlying all the models explored by these scholars is the assumption that things are moving—over time—inexorably toward greater degrees of complexity and sophistication. So whether it is teleology or evolution that sets the terms of the debate, whether it is cosmic consummation or adaptive rationality at the end of the line, the story is the story of progress.

This is a sweeping historical summary that leaves out considerable detail and nuance, but what it seeks to show is the degree to which the category of “religion” has remained the object of theoretical elaboration even when its referent remains slippery, enigmatic, and impossible to pin down. What interests me, in part, is the relationship between this radical inscrutability, on the one hand, and the intellectual turn toward religion across academic disciplines and interpretive/theoretical domains, on the other. In a profoundly ironic fashion, as the academy itself remains deeply secular, it seems as though scholars across fields of inquiry have nonetheless been getting religion. I remember when history took “the literary turn.” Now, theory and literary studies seem to have taken “the religious turn.” What are we to make of this?
In his 1996 essay “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida writes:

*We had in truth agreed to respond to a double proposition, at once philosophical and editorial, which in turn immediately raised a double question: of language and of nation. Now if, today, the “question of religion” actually appears in a new and different light, if there is an unprecedented resurgence, both global and planetary, of this ageless thing, then what is at stake is language, certainly—and more precisely the idiom, literality, writing, that forms the element of all revelation and of all belief, an element that ultimately is irreducible and untranslatable—but an idiom that above all is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from the people: from autochthony, blood and soil, and from the ever more problematic relationship to citizenship and to the state. In these times, language and nation form the historical body of all religious passion.* (4)

In this essay, Derrida is concerned with “the unprecedented resurgence [. . .] of this ageless thing,” something new on the horizon that is simultaneously a repetition, a reiteration of something from the past that, figured as “this ageless thing,” has no apparent history. “The return of the religious” (42), a phrase Derrida uses repeatedly, is a turn of phrase that signals his own situatedness in a philosophical, intellectual, theoretical terrain that has had its gaze turned in another direction. For, of course, “religion” never went away so that it might return, but it was intellectually sequestered: temporally, into the domain of the premodern or medieval; culturally, into the domain of the barbarian or irrational over against the civilized and rational; and imaginatively and ideologically, into the domain of the foreign.4 But not only did “religion” never really go away, it has also continued to operate openly in the modern and postmodern periods as a structure of conviction and performance in domains that might not have seemed at first glance to be inflected by it: politics, for example, or economics.5

So we might concede the point that it is not the case that religion has returned, but that scholars’ attention has returned to religion, and just so, continental philosophers have increasingly turned their attention to the classic religious texts of the West. A veritable cottage industry of publication opens up, for example, as one book and then another appears, all devoted to the writings of Paul in the New Testament.6 Striking among these writers who are using Paul to think with—to find a Jewish heretic
who might be coaxed back into the fold and offer up a livable political theology in the process (Taubes); to resituate the first-century missionary as “the poet-thinker of the event” (Badiou); or to reveal Paul as the author of the West’s fundamental messianic text (Agamben)—is the care with which they distance themselves from the frame of the religious. Anxiety about religion everywhere: Old texts? Fine. We know how to read them. Engaged, lived religion? Something “resurgent.” Something to keep an eye on.

While philosophers seek to think the religious and all the elements that travel alongside it in the abstract (“we will take these powers of abstraction as our point of departure,” says Derrida [“Faith” 4])—the sacred, the holy, the transcendent, cult, sacrifice, the divine, faith, salvation, the messianic, and so on—the other crucial arena in which religion comes to be theorized in the current theoretical moment is the domain where religion, public policy, and the law intersect. These issues play themselves out variously in different national contexts—India, France, Turkey, and the United States, just to name a few countries where contestation over religious practice, religious law, and the secular state and its laws has been quite amplified. The intricacies of individual cases within these contexts have received and continue to deserve careful analysis in other contexts, but what is important for this discussion is the way in which the state or international legal bodies come to be involved in theorizing and defining “religion” as part of a practical process: determining what the state will recognize as religion (in cases where religious groups argue that particular practices are either required by or prohibited by their religions when these positions come into conflict with the law) or what the state will protect as a matter of freedom of religion. Lawyer and anthropologist of religion Winnifred Fallers Sullivan invites us to consider, on the one hand, “the impossibility of religious freedom” (Impossibility) when she points out the paradox that the state must define “religion” in order to articulate what counts as “religious” in “religious freedom.” On the other hand, she casts critical light on the processes by which the state in the United States establishes religion in one of its most coercive institutions, the prison (Prison). We see how the courts and the legislatures see “this theoretical moment” as a moment that demands their own theoretical interventions, defining and refining the category of “religion” in the process. In another vein, “religion” comes to be theorized even in circumstances when it is most cloaked: when conservative legal strategists seek to draw upon the traditional theological reasoning of a particular tradition but translate that reasoning into “secular” language in order to make it acceptable to
the courts of a secular state. Here, we see “religion” itself again theorized, mapped, surgically separated from its purported opposite, secularism (Bamforth and Richards). Religion under these auspices is always the special case, the object requiring separation and protection, the object impervious to critique.

Meanwhile, as “religion” has become the object of theory among philosophers and among legislators and judges and policy makers, there is another curious thing going on in an altogether different set of domains: out in the world, where people do religion. I would argue that these embedded actors, in participating in the performances and logics of their religious communities, also generate indigenous theories out of their practices. Examples most certainly abound from various religious traditions, but insofar as I study the history of Christianity, I will draw my examples from the contemporary terrain of global Christianity. What I want to suggest, with these examples as illustrations, is that practitioners of religion possess a complex theoretical repertoire out of which they make implicit and explicit arguments about meaning and value, and out of these arguments formulate a framework for interpreting their experiences and the world. In other words, they make theory. In particular, in the case of the following three examples, one can see how practitioners generate theories of textuality and media—and produce new theoretical versions of religious practice and meaning in the process.

In his 2007 ethnography, A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church, Matthew Engelke invites his readers into a sustained encounter with the Friday apostolics, a small group of Zimbabwean Christians who describe themselves as “the Christians who do not read the Bible,” who instead receive the Word of God “live and direct” from the Holy Spirit. Dismissed by some other Zimbabwean Christians as “primitive” and “mad,” the Friday apostolics nevertheless take their rightful place in a long historical lineage of Christians who have struggled over the problem of textuality, of the materiality of writing and its capacity to mediate revelation, from the second century through the sixteenth and beyond. And although students of Christianity might be tempted initially to dismiss the Friday apostolics as a heterodox aberration or an ethnographic exception, Engelke challenges such facile responses by elegantly showing how this community articulates, embodies, and inhabits a complex postcolonial theoretical stance, what Engelke calls “the semiotics of immateriality.” Along with this mode of signifying practice—a practice that is profoundly performative and embodied—comes a radical critique and rejection of the
Bible as a material object, a thing that becomes “stale” and “falls apart,” a document transmitting the propaganda of Europeans, a dangerous artifact. The Friday apostolics’ privileging of immateriality is no simple asceticism: “To say that the apostolics want a faith in which things do not matter is not to say that they are renouncing the world. It is, rather, to suggest that they are making specific claims about how God becomes present through words, objects, and actions that exist within a hierarchy of significative and expressive forms. The semiotics of live and direct faith hinge on the assertion of immateriality” (17).

The Friday apostolics construct their Christian identity by means of a signifying practice that claims to be immediate and unmediated. At the same time, they have generated an indigenous theoretical idiom that critiques the domination of European missionaries and colonialism and rejects what they see clearly to be the quintessential material artifact of that domination: the Bible. As idiosyncratic as this example might be, I want to suggest that there are important insights that we might take away from the self-construction of the Friday apostolics as “the Christians who do not read the Bible” and Engelke’s generous and textured portrait of them. First, the Friday apostolics are undeniably theoreticians in their own right. Through their embodied performances—dressing in striking white garments, gathering in the wilderness (where all forms of mediation and inscription are forbidden), praying and singing—and through their considered responses to Engelke’s exploration of their religious sensibilities, the Friday apostolics articulate theories of textuality, reading and literacy, materiality and immateriality, transmission and interpretation, and modes of resistance. Second, the Friday apostolics’ example invites us to rethink the currently dominant tendency to collapse biblicism with the lived experience of Christianity, the legacy of two different strands of modern engagement with the Bible: Protestant evangelicalism and its tendency to represent itself as Christianity tout court, on the one hand, and professional biblical studies and its tendency to fetishize the text itself, on the other. To take the theoretical position of the Friday apostolics seriously—to focus on the exceptional character of their refusal to read the Bible as an occasion for thinking anew about the practices of biblical reading—is to open one’s own theoretical assumptions to critique and revision.

Still, the Friday apostolics occupy an extreme end of the continuum along which the theory-from-the-religious-inside might be mapped. For if the Friday apostolics position themselves and their religious practice as unmediated, others embrace rather different strategies of theorization.
and mediation (and remediation) in their enactments of biblical afterlives. Take, for example, Maria José de Abreu’s recent work on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement in Brazil (2005), which focuses on the media-savvy efforts of Padre Marcelo Rossi, former bodybuilder and physical education teacher turned priest, to reorganize for his followers their notions of the universe and their own subjectivities, using scripture as the template. For scripture to be the template for such a project is far from unusual, but Padre Marcelo’s techniques for achieving this reorganization of thought and self-understanding are. Blending traditional practices—the rosary cycle—with “pneumatic technologies” including his well-known “aerobics for Jesus,” Padre Marcelo establishes a complex connection between technology and scripture, body performances and inspiration, his own star power and the remaking of subjectivities among the large number of his followers.\(^7\)

Padre Marcelo’s pneumatic technologies and his ease with the practices of media emerged, as de Abreu explains, in a complex political and theological terrain: Padre Marcelo and his charismatic renewal movement, in contrast to Brazil’s strong tradition of liberation theology, insist that “spirituality and politics do not mingle” and turn to the New Testament story in which Jesus distinguishes between the things of God and the things of Caesar as a proof text (333). The contrast is practical as well as metaphorical: the practices of liberation theology’s biblical interpretation are grounded in lived and temporal realities; those of the charismatic movement express what de Abreu calls, following Gaston Bachelard, “the aerial imagination” (326). In a country where a Pentecostal conglomerate actually holds the trademark on the word gospel (Rohter), the traditional modes of thinking about sacred texts—safely sequestered from media and market flows—are most certainly left wanting.

Indeed, the flow of capital meets the dispersal of biblically inspired sound waves in Adele Horne’s important 2006 documentary, \emph{The Tailenders}, a portrait of the Los Angeles–based Global Recordings Network (grn), a Christian missionary organization that translates Bible stories and disseminates them by means of low-tech, “hand-crank” technology to as-yet unmissionized regions of the world.\(^8\) Horne, whose documentary won the Axium Truer Than Fiction Award at the 2007 Independent Spirit Awards, follows the grn missionaries from Los Angeles to the Solomon Islands, India, and Mexico, capturing on film the “translation” process—from written text into spoken word, from English into numerous indigenous languages, from speaking body into the disembodied sound of analog recordings. Drawing
upon David Himrod’s characterization of American Protestantism as the
syncretic blend of Christianity and technology, Horne shows how the project
of the GRN missionaries is tied up with and implicated in the processes of
global capital and how the introduction of even the most primitive technol-
ogy can usher in far more dramatic cultural changes for the communities
touched by the GRN. Horne also shows how the missionaries’ technical
bricolage is matched by their willingness to exploit the psychic, social, and
economic tools that lie at their disposal: taking advantage of the home-
sickness of migrant workers in Mexico by offering gospel stories in their
mother tongues; using the “five steps of selling” as a marketing model for
missionary work; allowing interviewees encountered in Indian shanties
to believe (mistakenly) that the evangelistic interviewers have come from
the government to help them. The Tailenders—those communities that
are the last to be touched by global efforts at evangelization by Christian
missionaries—are swept up in the waves of multiple flows: globalization,
evangelism, and mediatization. How they theorize the experience of the
disembodied voice speaking in an uncannily familiar idiom but translating
the selected contents of a book inscribed in a temporally and geographically
distant place remains the uncanny, unknowable part of this story.

In the academic study of religion, the question of what counts as
theory? is one with an expansive horizon—not only because the category
of “religion” itself continues to be a contested one but because the field
has no straightforward or universally recognized disciplinary frame. The
philosophical frame generates theoretical reflections on the category and
its cognates, remaining always a bit anxious about concrete and particular
instantiations of the generic category. The legal/policy frame illuminates
how a critical theory of religion shapes political debates but is also a
product of those debates. The ethnographic frame produces dozens, even
hundreds, of microexamples where theory emerges out of collective and
communitarian practices and shared narratives, local idioms and identi-

There is even a ghostly frame, the frame of hauntology that offers
a theory of the uncanny to the mix. The ghosts, though, are not nearly
so haunting as the other present absence in this discussion: the theologi-
cal frame, where the lines between theory about religion and religious
theory come to be most thoroughly blurred. Here reside studies of mysti-
cism (e.g., Certeau, Hollywood), efforts to bring philosophy and theology
together (e.g., Caputo, Sherwood, and Sherwood and Hart), and elegant
deconstructive readings of the Western tradition’s unsettled relationship
with its own originary wonderment (e.g., Rubenstein).
So, what’s the difference? What is and what is not theory of religion in “this theoretical moment”? I am temperamentally predisposed to take an expansive view here: we inherit and inhabit a certain general theoretical canon (that travels from Max Müller and Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and Sigmund Freud—but at the same time, “a certain critical and anti-religious vigilance [. . .] a certain filiation ‘Voltaire—Feuerbach—Marx—Nietzsche—Freud—[and even] Heidegger’” [Derrida, “Faith” 28]). We are also heirs to their heirs (Michel Foucault; the critique by Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson; Derrida, Acts). But the theoretical conversation keeps moving, now organized not around religion in itself but around new relationships, arrangements, and positionings: “religion and/as . . .” and “religion beyond. . . .” There is a sense of excess in these framings that overflows the banks that have traditionally channeled it. Part of the discomfort of the current political moment, I would venture, resides precisely in an anxious recognition that religion itself keeps moving—religion not at the limits but beyond the limits—and that religion has emerged in some way as itself a form of critical theory. It remains to be seen how the terrain will be mapped differently when religion is understood not only as the object of theorization but also as the embodiment of the practice of critique itself.


Notes

1 See King; and Fitzgerald, Ideology.

2 See Asad, Formations and Genealogies; Bhargava; de Vries and Sullivan; Jakobsen and Pellegrini.

3 See, for example, de Vries, Philosophy.

4 See, for example, Fitzgerald, Discourse.

5 See Gentile; Nelson.

6 Besides Taubes; Badiou; and Agamben, see also Gignac.

7 The uneasy relationship between Padre Marcelo’s celebrity status in Brazil and traditional church authority was recently displayed when the Pope visited Brazil in May 2007. See Rohter and Fisher.

8 See Horne, “Interview” and The Tailenders.

9 See Lorentzen et al.; and Meyer for two quite current exemplars.

10 See, for example, Gordon; Kwon; and McGarry.

11 For example, de Vries, Religion; and Stolow.
Works Cited


