Beyond Religion and Belief

Towards Respectful Religious Studies: An Introduction

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Contents

1. Functionalist approach as productive intuition

2. Functionalist approach as source of fallacies

3. Primacy of practice in social analysis

4. Ordering problem situations and mediating solutions

5. Bypassing „religion" and „magic": Focusing on uncertainty management

6. Uncertain times and the limits of instrumental rationality: Religious studies in Anthropocene

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Functionalist approach as productive intuition

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Vulnerability of (human) life as existential condition (O'Dea 1965)

1. Contingency or the *condition of uncertainty*

   ➢ "events of crucial significance to ... [man's] safety and welfare are beyond his prevision ... no matter how carefully planned or expertly executed."

2. Powerlessness or the *limited control and agency*

   ➢ man's "capacity to control and affect conditions of his life, although increasing, is inherently limited, ... not everything men desire can be attained."

3. Scarcity or the unequal distribution of resources and deprivation

- Religion as a means to adjust to these basic existential conditions

  - Analytical power of functionalist approach

    - Studying religion as mundane ordinary institutionalized and organized behaviour – rational in principle and producing complex and systemic individual, social and historical consequences

Functionalist approach as source of fallacies

How might religion assist the adjustment?

- By (1) being a specialized institution

- that (2) handles issues transcending everyday experience in the environment and institutions for handling ordinary troubles because these issues work as „breaking points" confronting „socially structured round of daily behavior"

- and therefore (3) need philosophical reconcilement and special ritual treatment that fosters solidarity

- (4) society is already here, its stable, readily created, and it's being destabilized by „breaking points" of uncertainty
  - All the three points are fallacies based on
    - (a) greco-judeo-christian theologies of moral godhead and transcendence as the founding source of reality
    - (b) intellectualist fallacy demanding that practical handling presupposes consistent theoretical preconception and that action demands clarified meaning
    - (d) that the modern European society had principally solved the *contingency* and *powerlessness* conditions by mastering the nature through rational analysis and technological means
    - (e) neglecting the limits of rational analysis and technology and in consequence seeing approaches transcending modern scientific and technological means as (mere) survivals and substitutions
    - (f) the very limits of functional theory presupposing clear function of each part in a whole and neglecting unstable, provisional character of society as an achievement of collective work

Empirically based alternative to functionalist fallacies

(1) Contingency and the lack of control is ordinary experience

(2) practically functionally fully integrated into sets of standard complex problem-solving strategies

(3) that are used so commonly and routinely that demand no special kind of explanation

(4) so there is no special institution as such to handle it, but just a series of standard and improvised means to handle ordinary troubles including uncertain elements in them

(5) managing uncertainty, furthermore, demands asserting the very uncertainty in order to make its handling (or taming the failure thereof) possible

> In consequence: A research strategy respecting the logic of real-life practice reorients the attention:

>> Not religion as an institution assisting in adjusting to fundamental existential conditions of men

>> But handling ordinary problems (which inevitably includes uncertainty) to understand practical ways of human adjustment to basic existential conditions of their life

>>> If there is whatever entity meaningfully appealable as religion in practical handling of uncertainty, then the description of such an entity may be and end, not the beginning of the research

>>> Research into a dance improvisation as the laboratory of handling uncertainty: constant presence of uncertainty in the field – from instructed action to uncertainty management

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Primacy of practice in social analysis

Functional analysis of magic: Primacy of practice in conditions of disrespect

- Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard:
  - Magic-ritual behaviour as handling of uncertainty and the lack of control
  - Overcoming intellectualism through primacy of practice (to the theory)
  - Overcoming exoticism (of Lévy-Bruhl)? Principal reasonableness of magical behaviour as pragmatic behaviour
  - Limits of functionalist relativism – despising practice
    - positioning *rational* practice (of Moderns) against *fancy* based causality
    - *natural* and *supernatural* causes – releasing psychological tension from a frustration from unrealized achievement through symbolical substitution of the desired act
    - Exotic fanciness of other's behaviour is the focus of explanation through the *ontology* of the explanator: symmetric comparison is not achieved
  - "Only we, judging from the standpoint of our modern views of nature, can distinguish objectively in such behavior those attributions of causality which are "correct" from those which are "incorrect," and then designate the incorrect attributions of causality as irrational, and the corresponding acts as "magic." (Max Weber 1922)

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W.I. Thomas: constructivist relativism and the primacy of practice

- Explaining social process instead of exotic behaviour of others – Polish peasant as a laboratory (unstable society in transition and visibilization of processes that hold societies together

- Every activity as solution of a situation

- No elements of the solution are "passively waiting for our activity" but must be defined as *objects of activity* (values) and the *conscious process that determines an activity appropriate to the object* (attitude). Activity is the connection of *value* and *attitude*.

  ➢ situations as situations are socially defined in terms of problems and appropriate means and no other than socially defined problems are ever an object of solution. Traditions, individual histories, institutionalized perspectives, patterned solutions as well a individual creativities are inevitably inscribed in situations and there is no way to explain activity but through them

  ➢ because "[i]f men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".

  ➢ so no explanation of behaviour is valid until it's built from definitions of situations and the consequences of these when embodied into actual activities (no ad hoc agencies implanted from foreign ontologies are valid and justifiable) → that applies to all presumptions concerning „natural" and seemingly „supernatural" agencies unless naturality / supernaturality is an emic distinction relevant for a given activity and its consequences

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Ordering problem situations and mediating solutions

We have never been modern: Uncertainty and the disenchantment fallacy

- *Insecure practices of pragmatic management of complexities* inscribed in modern ways as much as in traditional ones:
  - A contemporary choreographer: it is rather strange that some people believe that they can control what is happening to, and around, them
- "[N]o Delphic oracles are needed in the case of small issues, where reason prevails, but for really big questions, oracle-surrogates remain in use." (Gellner 1989)
- Great divide an asymmetric view on our ways and the ways of our others
  - „How naïve can we get about the beliefs of others? Old anthropological sources are full of the notion that primitive people expect rites to produce an immediate intervention in their affairs, and they poke kindly fun at those who supplement their rituals of healing with European medicine, as if it testified to lack of faith." (Douglas 1966)
- „Religious" or „magical" as irrational – „religious" is always the other, „religious" claim is delegitimized as far as the politics and economy is included
- Religion as a-political domain: neglecting inscription and integration of insecure practices into the instrumentally rational ones
  - while the success in handling the issues depends on virtuosity in efficient blending of rational, planned and insecure practices to tackle all aspects of complex issues, religious studies by focusing on a limited range of the insecure ones as if they constituted a religion looses the logic of actual practical problem-solving from its sight
  - → that results in theoretical impotence that is, however, efficiently supporting the modern social order and self-representation with the aura of scientific objectivity
  - that self-representation by neglecting in theory Modern's own tendency to practically blend instrumental and insecure practices (because uncertainty never disappeared, it rather proliferated – see Beck 1986) presents itself to others as rational and exclusive (including secularity, that means presence of irrational in politics) in its access to true Nature and *Knowledge* instead of just a *belief*
  - This othering and marginalizing effect demands leaving „religion" and „belief" behind and study the management of uncertainty first

Bypassing „religion" and „magic": Focusing on uncertainty management

Contingency of religious studies and correct intuitions of the forefathers

- Leaving religion to the end at best
  - "To define 'religion', to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study." (Weber 1922)
- Intuitions in contingent decision for religious studies
  - people's sensitivities concerning the world and agencies that count in it diffe
  - contingencies, uncertainties and experiences of the lack of control demand treatment that acknowledges them in what they are: contingent, unpredictable, too powerful
  - that awareness of vulnerability face to face environment and time is inscribed in songs, proverbs, stories, respected comments
  - experiences of uncertainty, lack of control and threat are faced despite difficulties by techniques with variable amount and kinds of mediations with variable confidence and expectations
- Yet longer chains and different kinds of mediation are not invitations to invent belief, but demands for a harder work to trace the translations of effects through each of the chains (standing by)
- Grasping all chains of mediation in uncertainty management from rational planning to ritual acting through symmetric means as the horizon coordinating various studies discovering various sets of composite formations in ways of handling ordinary issues as far as these are inevitably filled with uncertainty

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Uncertain times and the limits of instrumental rationality: Religious studies in Anthropocene

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Uncertain times and limits of instrumental rationality

- Distinguishing uncertainty and risk (Callon et al 2011)
    - risk as a „well-identified danger associated with a perfectly describable event or series of events…" that, as we know, may take place and can be calculated in terms of probability
    - decision based on probability calculus depends on: (1) an ability to establish an exhaustive list of the options open to us, (2) an ability to describe the entities constituting the world presupposed by each of these options, (3) ability to assess "the significant interactions that are likely to take place between these different entities"
    - an ability to make the decision than presupposes that the causal chain leading to each possible state of the world as an option on offer is known
    - but: "[i]n actual fact, science often proves to be incapable of establishing the list of possible worlds and of describing each of them exactly. This amounts to saying that we cannot anticipate the consequences of the decisions that are likely to be made; we do not have a sufficiently precise knowledge of the conceivable options, the description of the possible worlds comes up against resistant cores of ignorance, and the behavior and interactions of the entities making them up remain enigmatic." (Callon et al 2011)
    - therefore: "[c]ontrary to what we might have thought some decades ago, scientific and technological development has not brought greater certainty. On the contrary, …, it has engendered more and more uncertainty and the feeling that our ignorance is more important than what we know." (Callon et al 2011:19)

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Handling uncertainty and *hybrid forums*

- forums in which science and technology are intertwined with politics through controversies over issues at stake

- *controversy* as tool to reveal zones of ignorance by including groups affected by potential decision – constantly shifting boundaries between *technical* and *social*

- trajectory of controversies
  - a) radical uncertainty → suspicion → presumption of the causal chain
  - b) "Uncertainties may increase with the emergence of increasing numbers of diverse groups and the discovery of vast continents of ignorance."

Hybrid forums and the impossible disenchantment

- condition necessary to subjection of the world to *instrumentally rational calculation* → exclusion of maximum number of engaged parties from the *hybrid forum*

    - instrumentally rational calculation as disrespecting making profit on expense of affected parties not included in decision-making

    - *disenchantment* as silencing the voices of the affected

    - „religion", „magic", „superstition" as legitimization of suppression and delegitimization of involvement into *hybrid forum*

    - Uncertain times of *Anthropocene* as failed *democracy* backed by „objective science"

Renegotiating the common world in Anthropocene

- Great Divide and ontological dominance of Nature as refuse of Moderns to engage in proper *ontopolitics*

- „Globalization", „disintegration", „risk" and „precaution" as key terms marking the end of modernity

- New chance of „civilized" to reintroduce themselves to others now without tricks of „the most ruthless imperialism"

- No exoticism is a precondition: so no „rational" and „modern" Westerners as well as no „irrational" and „archaic" others
  - no false Great Divide, no Nature as the world already composed before the negotiation started with Cultures available to inconsequential talk

- Were to start?
  - With the facts – that is fabrications that are the result of an assembly and cooperation and thus real because of having consequences so that it is possible to asses how well or poorly fabricated they are
  - so the issue for the diplomacy is: How have you manufactured them? How do you verify that they are well constructed? (Latour 2002) What kinds of troubles do you solve through them? How do you achieve the solution? Who and how is affected?

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Religious studies in Anthropocene

- In what variable means the uncertainties are being handled?

- What consequences such handling has for which involved parties?

- What parties are neglected, how and with what legitimizations?

- How gods, heros, stories, songs, songs, concepts, theories help handle ordinary issues?

- What variable types of mediations are included in dealing with problems?

- How do these variable types of mediation contribute to realizing of appropriate solutions?

- How ontologies are negotiated?

- What prises are paid?