


Re-readings of major theorists of religion: Continuities and discontinuities

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How to cite this article:

Rafudeen, A., 2021, 'Re-readings of major theorists of religion: Continuities and discontinuities', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(2), a7156. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.7156>

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The collection 'Re-readings of major theorists of religion: Continuities and discontinuities' is, in one important sense, the product of a book club that we have been running in the Department of Religious and Arabic, University of South Africa for the last five years. The purpose of the club, which comprised members from both within and outside Unisa, was to read or re-read primary texts by scholars who have profoundly shaped the academic study of religion as we know it today. Thinkers covered included Max Muller, Max Weber, Rudolf Otto, Gerhardus van der Leeuw, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, George Bataille and David Chidester.

Of course, this is hardly an exhaustive list and the scope for further reading of this sort is rich indeed. But the point was really to look or relook at these and similar thinkers on their own terms and to consider or reconsider what they have to offer. But there is an obvious, bristling question that may be posed: why?

I think the first answer is that we now often talk *about* these thinkers rather than *to* their texts. There is a need amongst us who may have earlier dealt with these thinkers as part of our training in the study of religion, to refresh our memories and to again ponder their works in the light of our own unfolding experiences. Durkheim read at 50 may provide a different set of issues compared with the Durkheim we read at 30. That in itself is worth exploring.

But there is something else. As we explored various fundamental texts, we found that the issues they have raised have not really gone away. While there is development in religious studies theory, there are also profound patterns of repetition. The academic study of religion continues to be shaped by tensions between phenomenologists on the one hand and historicists on the other hand – tensions prefigured in the writings of these thinkers which they approach in their own virtuosi ways. These tensions, in turn, speak to underlying conceptions of time, space, and the nature of reality that cannot be extricated from a scholar's own view of the world. These methodological and philosophical tensions also animate and will continue to animate, postcolonial and decolonial approaches to religion. In short, even though we may not always agree with their trajectories of thought, we can continue to learn from their reflections on these stubbornly perennial issues.

This is the background that informs about the present collection. Inevitably, as book clubs go, new members are acquired and consequently new thinkers are explored. And scholars who are not part of the book club were also invited, given their particular areas of interest and graciously agreed to contribute to the collection. We united around a common thread but were left to our own devices as we explored our individual predilections. Ulrich Berner explores connections between Max Muller and Darwinism in helping to construct a science of religion as distinct from theology. The beginnings of our discipline are always useful to navigate, reminding us to have an ongoing awareness of the genealogical frameworks in which we operate. Jaco Beyers highlights the Romanticism of Schleiermacher while throwing general light on his life, context and thought. Schleiermacher's focus on feeling and intuition, as Beyers indicates, is particularly important in countering the loss of personal meaning associated with our prevailing technocratic modes of being. Michel Clasquin-Johnson's reflection on Trevor Ling provides the counterintuitive insight that people historically belonged to 'civilisations' rather than 'religion'. It does lead to the interesting question of how self-conscious we are today of our own 'civilisation', which Clasquin-Johnson labels 'modernity', which we similarly do not think of as a religion at all. Ulrike Kistner explores Freud on the relationship between religion and

Note: Special Collection: Re-readings of Major Theorists of Religion: Continuities and Discontinuities, sub-edited by Mohammed (Auwais) Rafudeen (University of South Africa).

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psychopathology and Garth Mason reflects on Keiji Nishitani's thoughts on the relationship between the self and religion. In their different ways, both Kistner and Mason bring us back to the need to be continually aware of the intrinsically psychological nature of religious experience in any socio-historical exploration of religious phenomena. The importance of this dimension is brought home by Alan Northover in his critique of Durkheim's sociological reductionism, using San ethnography as his reference point and proposing a renewed focus on shamanism instead. It hardly needs saying that psychological experiences work within particular overarching social and historical frameworks. Sepetla Molapo and Johan Strijdom, again in different ways, explore these frameworks. Strijdom focuses on how the seminal work of Edward Tylor is approached by

Durkheim and Chidester, exploring the implications of their reflections for studying the lived reality of religion today. Molapo focuses on colonial logic and its devastating social consequences, employing Milbank's notion of the gift to counter that logic in the African setting. The focus on colonial logic raises issues about how colonialism views space and how this can be contrasted with the logic that underpins the gift. My own intervention with Eliade can be seen as a further exploration of the logic of modernity, but with a particular focus on the nature of time.

I will leave it to the reader to explore the collection on their own terms. Personally, I believe that these older thinkers continue to offer fecund avenues for thinking about their own current realities.