ELSEVIER

Religion 34 (2004) 291–313

RELIGION

www.elsevier.com/locate/religion

Constructionism versus what?

Steven Engler

Mount Royal College, 4825 Mount Royal Gate S.W., Calgary, T3E 6K6 Canada

---

Abstract

Constructionism is a theoretical perspective with great potential usefulness for the study of religion. However, the theory is often assumed rather than clarified, and it is often reduced to its extreme relativistic versions. As a result, its value has stagnated even as talk of constructs has proliferated. Constructionism has been portrayed as the other of religion's two realisms: theological and phenomenological. It has been cast in the role of a conveniently discounted counter-position. Constructionist work in the study of religion, by failing to clarify its theoretical basis adequately and by too often accepting the role of antagonist to realism, shares responsibility for this misleading and detrimental characterisation. Lack of due attention to theory has obscured the status and claims of constructionism. This theoretical perspective is not necessarily reductionist or radically relativist, and it is not simply the opposite of realist or *sui generis* approaches to religion. Constructionism can help us understand how historically and culturally contingent religious phenomena arise from the raw materials of our physical and social worlds.

The first two sections of this article present a brief sketch of the development and key characteristics of constructionism, illustrating something of its breadth and variety. In the third section a consideration of constructionism in religious studies demonstrates the need to clarify three key issues. First, constructionist approaches are not necessarily anti-realist and so can be consistent with critical theological or *sui generis* perspectives. Second, the overwhelming lack of explicitly developed theory has obscured and obstructed the usefulness of constructionism in religious studies. Third, the relationship between constructionism and other theoretical positions needs to be clarified.

© 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

E-mail address: sengler@mtroyal.ca

0048-721X/$ - see front matter © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1016/j.religion.2004.09.001

Genealogies of constructionism

'Constructionism' is preferable to 'constructivism' as the latter term refers also to a version of intuitionism in the philosophy of mathematics, to a theory in cognitive psychology associated with the work of Jean Piaget, and to a tradition of Soviet and European art. In another vein, philosopher Nelson Goodman calls his project 'constructionalism', drawing on Russell, Carnap and Quine and emphasising logical (rather than social) 'worldmaking' (see Goodman, 1978; Aagaard-Mogensen et al., 1987; cf. Hacking, 1999, p. 44).

Kant is generally the first major figure cited as a forebear of constructionism because of his critique of basic categories of knowledge (see O'Neill, 1989). Ian Hacking calls him 'the great pioneer of construction' (Hacking, 1999, p. 41). More broadly, psychologist Kenneth Gergen notes that

> Philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche and various phenomenologists have tended to adopt an *endogenic perspective* regarding the origins of knowledge. In this case, knowledge depends on processes (sometimes viewed as innate) endemic to the organism. Humans harbour inherent tendencies, it is said, to think, categorize, or process information, and it is these tendencies (rather than features of the world in itself) that are of paramount importance in fashioning knowledge. (Gergen, 1985, p. 269)

Constructionist theory draws on several of the main streams of sociological theory. One reviewer goes as far as to suggest that 'the entire field of sociology has been a social constructionist one for most of the twentieth century' (Maines, 2000, p. 577). Various precursors are cited: Karl Marx's concepts of reification and fetishism; Karl Mannheim's project of 'unmasking' the social functions of knowledge; the Frankfurt school's radical critique of the historical and ideological contingency of western Reason; Bertrand Russell's, Rudolf Carnap's and Willard Van Orman Quine's theories of logical construction, especially as developed in Nelson Goodman's theory of 'worldmaking'; George Herbert Mead's relational view of the generalised other; and the influential legacy stretching from Max Weber's *verstehen* through Alfred Schutz's life-world to the ethnomethodology of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Schutz, for example, extended Weber's methodological insights to an exploration of symbolically pre-structured reality:

> The social world… has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought objects which determine their behavior, define the goals of their action, the means available for attaining them. (cited Habermas, 1984, p. 121)

One of Schutz's students, Peter Berger, played a key role in the development of constructionism, coauthoring with Thomas Luckman the single most influential work in the area: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Two years before this seminal book appeared, Berger co-authored a paper arguing that marriage is a model of the process by which 'the socially constructed world' is 'sustained through conversation with significant others' (Berger and Kellner, 1993 [1964], pp. 246, 247). One year before *The Social Construction of Reality*, he co-authored a paper arguing that the Marxist concept of reification is central to understanding 'the human enterprise of producing a world… as… a social process…. The reality of such a world is given neither in itself nor once and for all. It must be constructed and re-constructed over and over again' (Berger and Pullberg, 1965, p. 201). Two works in science studies have also played key roles in the growth of social constructionism: Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]) and Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life: The [Social] Construction of Scientific Facts* (1986 [1979]).[1]

Conventional histories of theoretical perspectives emphasise individual contributions and key advances. The genealogy of construction just given is descriptive, listing commonly cited precedents. Michael Lynch (1998) points out that a constructionist genealogy of constructionism would look very different. On the one hand it might involve drawing on alternative voices. Repeating standard accounts of constructionism's historical trajectory skips over a richer account of potentially, useful though overlooked approaches.

For scholars of religion, two resources seldom cited as precedents have much to offer. Recent work on Friedrich Schleiermacher, especially correctives to views that his work on hermeneutics is rooted in intuition, suggests that he has much to add to a Kantian perspective. Schleiermacher attempted to ground truth in a dialectical relation between spontaneity and receptivity, holding that 'true concepts do not pre-exist in a 'Platonic' manner; they are, rather, the normatively constituted aim of the activity of thought in a community' (Bowie, 1998, p. xxii). Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, once reclaimed from Dilthey's distorting legacy, offer resources for a dynamic tension between realism and constructionism. Another untapped resource is Burkart Holzner's *Reality Construction in Society* (Holzner 1972 [1968]), published shortly after Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967). Where Berger and Luckmann place almost exclusive emphasis on the mediating function of social roles in a given society, Holzner adds a nuanced analysis of the differential construction of knowledge in complex social systems. Where Berger and Luckmann have been criticised for their exclusive emphasis on the dominant group in a society, Holzner's approach is more open-ended.

On the other hand additions to the list of individual contributors do not move far enough beyond 'heroic genealogies' (Lynch, 1998, pp. 15, 21). Even a much fuller account of figures who developed or prefigured constructionism remains fragmentary. An alternative, and potentially more useful, approach would be to explore linkages between themes in the trajectory of the theory and the social formations that have generated and used it. After all, the question 'who is doing the constructing and why?' applies to constructionist theory as much as to other theories.

A constructionist genealogy of constructionism in religious studies, for example, might emphasise ways in which different scholars and groups of scholars have used the concept of 'construction' strategically within formative theoretical and metatheoretical debates within their fields. For example, the place of 'construction' in the debate between religious studies and theology is different from its place in recent discussions of *sui generis* discourses of religion. This article offers a preliminary sketch of the current status of constructionism in religious studies, one that might serve as an introduction to a constructionist genealogy of constructionism in the field.

---

[1] The word 'social' was dropped from the title of the second edition of Latour and Woolgar because of its perceived redundancy.

An overview of constructionism

Constructionism can be characterised in two ways: internally, in terms of its defining characteristics, and externally, in terms of the views that it generally opposes. Internally, constructionist perspectives generally take at least some of the following stances: anti-essentialism; anti-realism; an emphasis on historical and cultural specificity of knowledge; an emphasis on language as a pre-condition of thought; an emphasis on language as a form of social action; a focus on interaction and social practices; and a focus on processes, not simply products (see Burr, 1995). Constructionism involves an emphasis on context-bound aspects of objects and ideas. It emphasises the historically developed and culture-specific nature of the objects of study, and it places central importance on the role of discourse in constituting these objects as historically and culturally contingent.

Given this general emphasis on contextualisation, the word ‘social’ in ‘social constructionism’ is arguably redundant (see Latour and Woolgar, 1986, p. 281; Hacking, 1998, pp. 49–52). Constructionism is fundamentally a theoretical perspective that analyses the constitution of specific phenomena from raw materials of a different type or order. It focuses on discursive and social processes of construction. Use of the word ‘social’ should properly be limited to cases where attention is directed to the constructive role of specific social processes. In what follows, I will use the more general term ‘constructionism’ except where the specific term social constructionism is warranted.

Ian Hacking provides another useful characterisation of constructionisms. He distinguishes ‘six grades of constructionism’ along a spectrum from mild to radical (see Hacking, 1999, pp. 19ff.). The *historical* approach claims that a claim, view, or institution, X, is a contingent result of historical events. It merely prioritises historical methods and refrains from any normative evaluation of X. The *ironic* approach argues that what is generally thought to be inevitable could have been otherwise. This view also tends to take a negative but resigned normative stance. The *reformist* approach takes a negative view but also tries to modify some aspects of X by drawing attention to its contingency. The *unmasking* approach seeks to undermine X by exposing the ideological or socially interested function that it serves. It takes a negative view but is largely an intellectual exercise. The *rebellious* approach goes further, arguing that we would be better off without X. The *revolutionary* approach goes still further, attempting to do away with X. Hacking’s spectrum reminds us that, in addition to analysing modes of contingency, constructionist views also range from descriptive to normative, from potentially conservative (explaining how objects and ideas are maintained through discursive and social processes) to actively subversive (using the assertion of contingency as a springboard for change). In management studies, for example, Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* is invoked as a forebear by both sides of a fundamental theoretical divide—the old institutional paradigm emphasising the conservative dimension of social constructionism, analysing how rules become institutionalised and taken for granted; the new institutional paradigm emphasising the dynamic dimension, analysing how rules are contested and reformed (see Hirsch and Boal, 2000).

Externally, constructionist perspectives generally stand sharply opposed to realist, essentialist, naturalist and physicalist perspectives. The clearest and most influential example is the field of science studies, where radical constructionist claims stand opposed to the realist view that the scientific method generates objectively true knowledge about the world. The extreme constructionist view contends that they are artifacts of historically and culturally specific beliefs and practices. For example, subatomic particles like quarks are observable only indirectly, using complex experimental apparatuses the design of which itself embodies specific theories. For most scientists, these experiments attest to the objective reality of quarks, but for some theorists they do not. Many in the field of science studies underline the social processes that shape the selection (elaboration and survival) of theories and experimental techniques. They argue that these mediating processes result in objects and theories that are not purely objective—that is, that could have been otherwise or that are nominalist artifacts the recurrence of which stems from regularities in socially situated discourses and not from correspondence with objective reality (see Pickering, 1994; Bloor and Barnes, 1996; cf. Hacking, 1999, pp. 63ff.).

The place of constructionism in science studies can seem simple. It is often portrayed as the other of realism. This characterisation is justified in part by the occasional extreme claim. For example, constructionist Robert Markey, in an article called 'The Irrelevance of Reality', claims that

> Within a dialogically agitated environment, debates about reality become, in practical terms, irrelevant. 'Reality', finally, is a historical construct. We can thump our hands on tables and exclaim, 'This is real!', just as we can thump our hands to our chests and assert, 'I think, therefore I am'. But these gestures are not indicative of any ultimate truths; they are historically bounded strategies of affirmation. (Markley, 1992, p. 270).[2]

Yet constructionist views of science rarely go as far as to deny the existence of objective reality. Instead, they focus on other issues: the contingencies introduced by power struggles in research projects (see Collins and Pinch, 1993); the impact of government funding priorities on directions of research (see Hacking, 1999, pp. 163–85); elements of nominalism introduced when the complexity and expense of replicating research lead scientists to 'agree to agree' based on data that is still open to question (see Latour and Woolgar, 1986); the ways in which science shapes and is shaped by ideologies of gender and race (see Harding, 1993, 1998; Keller and Longino, 1996); ideological implications of the association between science and western economic domination (see Margolin and Margolin, 1990); and the impact of transnational science on local views of culture, science and technology (see Fujimura, 2000). None of these constructionist approaches dictates the extreme relativism that would deny the reality of the material world.

Constructionism plays a similar role as the contextualised other of naive realism in a number of other social scientific debates. For example, psychologists and anthropologists have long debated whether people of different cultures share a universal and therefore objective range of colour perception, emotional experience and conceptions of the 'self'.[3] The verdict on colours tends to realism (see Kaiser and Boynton, 1996, p. 499). The verdict on the 'self' tends to constructionism (see Kusserow, 1999). The debate on emotion continues (see Hinton, 1999).

---

[2] This is one of the passages skewered by Alan Sokal in his infamous *Social Text* parody (Sokal, 1996a, p. 238n.39; cf. Sokal, 1996b)

[3] On colours see Berlin and Kay (1969), Hilbert (1987) and Hardin and Maffi (1997). On emotions see Harré (1986), Lutz (1986) and Lynch (1990). On the 'self' see Baumeister (1987), Sampson (1988) and Markus and Kitayama (1991).

Constructionism also plays an important role in the study of phenomena with more obvious social aspects. For example, in technology studies, constructionism questions the view that technological artifacts take predetermined forms in response to specific human needs (see Pinch and Bijker, 1987). Wiebe Bijker argues that technologies stabilise in specific forms through processes of negotiation among a variety of social actors, representing the interests of science, industry, government and the public (see Bijker, 1995). Andrew Feenberg (2002) argues that ideology shapes this process: the interests of elites are naturalised in views that technological developments are inevitable and a sign of 'progress'. Again, constructionism stands sharply opposed to a naturalist or essentialist view. Debate takes place largely along this limited axis.

Constructionism can temper naive realist or naturalist views in more than one way. Hacking points to three 'sticking points' where constructionist views are at odds with naive realism (see Hacking, 1999, p. 33). The first sticking point is the issue of *contingency*. Constructionism is most recognisable by its fundamental assertion that objects and ideas might have been otherwise than they are. Where realism posits external constraints that prevent contingent modifications in the face of historical or cultural factors, constructionism emphasises exactly this contingency. The second sticking point is the issue of *nominalism*. Where realism posits that the referential function of language is rooted in a correspondence between sign and world, constructionism challenges this view. At its most relativistic, constructionism holds that language refers to nothing beyond its own web of circulating signs: language refers not to ontologically real objects in an independent world but to other elements in a universe the reality of which is entirely discursive and dependent. The third sticking point is the issue of the *stability* of representations and theoretical perspectives. The realist account is that representations and theories are stable if they correspond to an independent reality. Constructionism emphasises social and discursive factors in attempting to explain why some representations and theories are less transient than others.

In sum, constructionisms vary in several ways: according to the kinds of objects or ideas analysed as constructs; by the scope and degree of relativism; along a spectrum from descriptive through normative to activist; and by a theoretical focus on contingency, nominalism or stability. In religious studies, constructionism is generally portrayed as anti-realist. This portrayal as the other of realism serves strategic purposes by marginalizing constructionism, making it easier to dismiss by reducing constructionism to its most radical forms. Discursive processes of definition, analysis, comparison and classification frame this theoretical perspective in a manner that serves the interests of specific social groups—for example, certain scholars of religion.

Constructionism in religious studies

The place of constructionism in religious studies is especially complex because the tension with naive realism is only one of the theoretical axes that frame theories of religion. This section of the article offers a brief overview of a range of appeals to constructionism in religious studies. I argue that constructionism is useful only if it is clearly defined and is distinguished from other approaches. But clarity regarding the implications of 'construct-talk' is rare in religious studies. Publications in the field of religious studies use 'construction' and related terms in a wide variety of ways. Our first task, then, is that of clarification. The remainder of this section attempts to sort out three key issues, arguing that:

1. Constructionism is not necessarily anti-realist.
2. The lack of explicitly developed theory has hampered constructionist work in religious studies and has obscured important critical arguments behind vague constructionist rhetoric.
3. The relation between constructionism and other theoretical axes in the study of religion is less oppositional and more nuanced than is generally assumed.

Beyond anti-realism

Constructionist views are not necessarily anti-realist. Recalling the variety of questions asked by constructionist approaches in science studies, we must keep in mind that atheists, agnostics and persons of faith can all agree that scriptural interpretations, mystical experiences, ritual gestures, religious architecture and symbolic representations all have dimensions of cultural and historical contingency. They are, to this minimal extent, constructed differently according to context. The use of the term 'construction' merely flags the need to clarify the discursive and social processes that lead to such variation, whether or not a realist core is asserted.

The claim that religious phenomena are *nothing but constructions* is a very different one. For example, it is a straw doll argument to claim that the 'weakness of social constructionism as an epistemology lies in the fact that one can agree with the bare premise that knowledge is a construct, but disagree with the conclusion that objectivity is impossible' (Bauerlein, 2001, p. 229). It is easy to argue against extreme versions of radical relativist constructionism, but doing so begs the more general question of the perspective's usefulness. Constructionism is not necessarily relativism.

The situation is rendered more complex in religious studies by the presence of two competing versions of realism: specific theological traditions and general phenomenological perspectives. Evangelical views of grace and Eliadean views of the sacred both emphasise universality and realism over against the alleged radical relativism of constructionism. In this way theological and crypto-theological views construct a common enemy. But this criticism is misleading. Theology and phenomenology can benefit from techniques for taking account of at least some elements of historical and cultural contingency. For example, Michel Despland (1991) points out that the influence of Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* was shaped by historical, cultural and linguistic factors, as seen in its very different reception among French scholars of religion.[4]

Theological appeals to constructionism underline the need to distinguish constructionism from anti-realism. Theological writing makes a number of constructionist claims: that paradigms of biblical criticism construct various models and strategies of reading and even readers themselves (see Segovia, 1995); that a social constructionist approach to the Church complements traditional ecclesiological views by drawing attention to 'the proper analysis of priesthood as lived social experience' (Yates, 1998, p. 19); and that faith is a social construction, underlining the importance of Christian fellowship and suggesting that a 'sociological perspective can serve a prophetic role in the church' (Leming, 1989, p. 167).

---

[4] For an exceptional contexualisation of nineteenth-century French theological thought see Despland (1998).

In one sense the study of religion is inherently constructionist. Extreme relativist views notwithstanding, the *contextualisation of the sacred* is an ineluctable characteristic of the field. Few scholars of religion would deny that religious phenomena exhibit some degree of historical and cultural contingency. Constructionism simply highlights the value of exploring the processes through which these contingencies emerge. Still, this procedure leaves key questions unanswered.

Clarifying *the extent to which* and *the processes by which* contingent formations are produced allows us to reflect back on the theoretical premises of constructionism, arriving at a clearer sense of what raw materials are used and of how they are put together. Asking how economic and political forces shape religious phenomena reveals contingency (hence 'construction') regardless of one's stance with respect to ultimate ontological claims. Despite the highly visible conflict between the extremes of the spectrum—theological realism and radical relativism—a gamut of interesting and productive debates fills out the middle ground. Constructionism can affirm, deny or bracket the ontological status of raw materials and still fruitfully study the processes through which religious phenomena take shape.

As is the case with science studies, constructionist approaches in religious studies point to elements of contingency in religious phenomena and degrees of under-determination in the language that describes them. They examine how the interests of specific social groups are masked by purportedly objective claims. Constructionism in religious studies is not necessarily atheistic or even agnostic regarding the ontological claims of specific theological traditions or of general phenomenological perspectives. At a minimum, however, constructionism does note that there is more to religion than a set of invariant objects and ideas floating free of any context.

Jonathan Z. Smith is generally read as providing a warrant for an extreme relativist view of constructionism. His comment in *Imagining Religion* is likely the most frequently cited theoretical claim in the field:

> *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982, p. xi; cf. Smith, 1998, pp. 281, 282)

However, this statement provides no warrant for extreme relativism. Mid-twentieth-century critiques of positivist philosophies of science argued persuasively that data are necessarily theory-laden. Data are solicited, observed, selected, operationalised and interpreted in the light of theory. There are not objective and independent facts awaiting scholars to discover, interpret and explain them. This is Smith's point. We should read his infamous claim—'*there is no data for religion*'—as recognising that religious 'data' are always already theory-laden. There *are* data for religion, but these are not objective facts the religiosity of which is independent of our scholarly operations. Rather, the data exist in a living relation to specific theoretical perspectives, and this relation needs to be clarified—a task that scholars of religion too often fail to undertake. Smith is not saying that there are turtles all the way down, but merely that talking of 'turtles' already presupposes a specific conceptual framework.

Smith distinguishes more recently between 'the primary level of facts and ad hoc typologisations' on the one hand and 'the second-order level of theoretical discourse' on the other: it ‘is only theories and concepts that convert facts into data, that render them significant as examples of larger intellectual issues which comprise the agendum, debated though it may be, of a field’ (Smith, 1995, p. 413; cf. McCutcheon, 2001, pp. 103ff.). A merely descriptive topography of ‘religious’ material buttresses the institutional status of the field: it allows us to point to what we study as if it were a natural part of the furniture of the world. But this is not enough. The study of religion demands engagement with the theoretical implications of that label. On this view we have two levels of construction, two degrees of theory-ladenness in the materials of religion: facts described as religious, and data theorised as religious.

Pushing further, it is arguable that Smith’s work is not anti-realist at all. His thoughtful and nuanced writings are provocative but not one-sided. The definitive tension at the heart of constructionism, between contingent constructions and constraining raw materials, is implicit in his influential essay ‘Map Is Not Territory’:

> In the West, we live in a post-Kantian world in which man is defined as a world-creating being and culture is understood as a symbolic process of world-construction…. What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to live. (Smith, 1978, p. 290)

Smith’s title, ‘Map Is Not Territory’, implicitly makes the same point. For the realist, map is territory in the sense that both share objectively homologous relations between a set of points in space: one maps onto the other in a paradigmatic example of the correspondence view of truth. ‘Is’ points to equivalence, not identity. For the relativist, map is territory in the sense that both make culturally contingent claims to represent such a set of spatial relations: the map is not objectively true because the territory manifests no truth (see Turnbull, 1994). To say that map is not territory makes a qualitative distinction between these phenomena, and it raises the question of the relation between the two. It forces us to ask how the raw material of territory is constructed as map.

The issue here is what kinds of raw materials are used in the process of construction. Smith’s astute denial that scholarly categories correspond perfectly to equivalent real phenomena is not a denial of the existence of correlated phenomena or of the possibility of knowledge of them. Kant’s distinction between noumena and phenomena is central here: constructionism, like phenomenology, can bracket ontological claims regarding raw materials. Whether or not God or the sacred exists is not at issue; the point is that the raw materials of religion are theory-laden as soon as they are placed on the table. Making sense of the worlds we find ourselves within is an active, constructive process. This view does not deny the existence of facts beyond our data. Rather, it holds that we have no privileged, universal, objective access to such facts outside of our conceptual frames. Most important, it turns our attention to the key issues of constructionism: what kinds of raw materials, granted their theory-ladenness, impose what kinds of constraints on constructions of religious phenomena? What specific processes build what products from these raw materials? And what are the social, political and institutional contexts within which these processes occur?

Even if naive ontological and essentialist claims can do no more than point to a kind of noumenal sphere of facts beyond the data of religion, this position does not paint us into the unfurnished corner of radical relativism. Taking the metaphor of construction seriously forces us to confront the question not just of raw materials but also of process:

> Anything worth calling a construction was or is constructed in quite definite stages, where the later stages are built upon, or of, the product of earlier stages. Anything worth calling a construction has a history. But not just any history. It has to be a history of building. (Hacking, 1998, p. 56; cf. Hacking, 1999, p. 49)

Too often, constructionist work uses a relativist punch line as a substitute for the story of construction. The status of raw materials and the process of working with them are the central issues.

Acknowledging the power that scholars wield to shape their objects of study through analysis, comparison, classification and generalisation does not imply that religious phenomena are *nothing but* constructions. This recognition forces us to address

> the problem of the relationship between constructs and raw materials.... [A]lthough one can manufacture all sorts of things using all kinds of raw materials, certain raw materials lend themselves to fashioning certain objects whereas other raw materials do not. (Benavides, 2000, p. 116; see also Benavides, 1997, p. 130; Benavides, 2001, p. 107)

The fact that this point is at the same time both obvious and polemical in the study of religion suggests that the field harbours certain biases or blind spots.

Relativistic views that fail to recognise the importance of constraints on the processes of construction have political effects. Meera Nanda has recently drawn attention to the repressive implications of the recent convergence between constructivist views of science and religious fundamentalism (see Nanda, 1998, 2000). India's fundamentalist BJP government has appealed explicitly to Western scholars' placement of the natural sciences on the same plane as all other cultural systems, and this appeal has justified state support of traditional sciences and a move away from Western science—for example, the replacement of modern with Vedic mathematics in schools. These appeals to relative truth have the effect of constraining access to a pragmatically useful education for certain sections of the Indian population.

It is significant that Smith writes of data 'for' religion. He emphasises that religion is a product of scholarly activity, and, as is the case with all activity, this recognition raises the question of responsibility. Smith states repeatedly that 'religion' is, like 'language' in linguistics, a second-order concept (see Smith, 1988, p. 235; Smith, 1998, pp. 281, 282). This is not to deny that people speak but simply to remind us that we, to some extent, construct what we study through the very act of studying it. Constructionism does not provide a warrant for an escape into purely discursive play. Smith's texts are not a relativist Hanon, a set of canonical finger-exercises for a post-modern keyboard. For Smith, the recognition that scholars construct their object and categories of study to any extent forces us to take responsibility for our creations/constructions (see Smith, 1988, p. 235). Considering constructionism more attentively promises to highlight this task.

In sum, constructionism is not the opposite of realism. It offers the possibility of more responsible and responsive theories of religion. The recognition of historical and cultural contingency is entirely consistent with realist views of religious phenomena. Even if the train of constructionism makes its final stop in the relativity roundhouse at Quaquaversal Junction, we are free to leave the train before it arrives. The scenery is eye-opening from the start. Constructionism and realism are theoretical tendencies that stand in productive mutual tension, not in entrenched and mutually exclusive antagonism. Inventories of raw materials and histories of building require an attentiveness to theoretical and methodological issues that is often lacking in the study of religion.

Making theory explicit

The second of three issues to clarify is the paucity of explicit theory in constructionist work in religious studies. Constructionism is often simply asserted or taken for granted. Studies that appeal to ‘constructs’ or ‘constructionism’ are misleading, or at best trivial, unless they put forward a developed theory of the process and significance of construction. Doing so involves specifying, first, how a specific kind of object or idea is constructed and from what raw materials, and, second, how this theoretical approach offers advantages over other possible approaches. These requirements are especially important in the face of the wide variety of objects and ideas that are treated as constructs.[5]

Two uses of ‘construction’ in religious studies can be immediately set aside as trivial in this sense. On the one hand, for example, Western portrayals of Asian religions, a sectarian interpretation of a particular concept, or a specific individual’s conception of religion are described as ‘constructions’ (see, for example, Urban, 1999; Pennington, 2001; Clarke, 2001; Despland, 1999). As a marker of constructionism, we can set aside these uses because they do not offer any account of a process of construction apart from a nod to the general sense of contingency implicit in any given perspective. The concept of ‘construction’ in these studies is not necessarily problematic, for if nothing else, it reminds readers of the historical and cultural contingency of religious phenomena. But readers should also be reminded that the presence of the word ‘construction’ does not itself imply, much less support, a constructionist theory. On the other hand a statistical correlation between the frequency of a particular religious experience and such characteristics as race and gender is sometimes cited as evidence that the experience is ‘socially constructed’ (see, for example, MacDonald, 1992). For the same reason this blunt recognition of correlation is not constructionist. Simply noting a correlation begs the explanatory question that any constructionist view must clarify. Neither of these sorts of cases offers a theory. Neither goes beyond talk of constructs to set out and defend a particular formulation of constructionism.

In other cases the appeal to construction seems to be superfluous or even detrimental to a valuable critique. For example, a feminist critique of Otto’s view of numinous experience is framed as a ‘Katzian constructionist’ approach, but the recognition of Otto’s gender-biased appeals to experience is effective without recourse to the language of constructionism. The contribution of the critique the constructionist debate is minimal because it takes the contingency of religious experience for granted rather than arguing for it (see Raphael, 1994). Another study makes an excellent point that Barth's view of radical transcendence stands in tension with his view that homosexuality is unnatural, but the choice to frame this point as a constructionist critique adds little (see Balboa, 1998). In another example a recent collection complains about the institutional problems of religious studies and academia more generally—for example, the difficulties faced by women and recent graduates seeking employment and the threats to the humanities in the face of corporate economic administrative models. The collection frames these issues as one of 'the construction of pedagogical spaces' (see Juschka, 1999). Again, the critique is valuable, but it is independent of talk of construction. These papers do not clarify their views of processes of construction enough to capitalise on the theoretical perspective or even to make clear how this perspective is useful. There is no point in talking 'constructs' without a theory of construction.

---

[5] For evidence of the diffuse usage of ‘construction’ in religious studies today, see the range of appearances the term makes in the thirty essays collected in the recent *Guide to the Study of Religion*: modes of construction include academic, cultural, narrative and social; alleged constructs include such concepts as boundaries, categories, concepts, descriptions, experience, oppositions, reality, religion, ruptures, the sacred, scholarship, society, subjects, systems, temporal geography, theories, totalities and worlds (see Braun and McCutcheon, 2000).

Many studies go farther in acknowledging processes of construction, yet without adequate theoretical clarification. They assert that construction is taking place without clarifying the nature of this claim and often without offering evidence that the proposed process does in fact take place. These works describe or compare social, historical or cultural variation in religious phenomena without addressing the mechanism of this variation. Alleged constructs are examined, but the process of construction is taken for granted.

Construction sites

A closer look at specific examples of appeals to the rhetoric of constructionism in the study of religion will illustrate the need for more explicit theory. Studies that work with Weber's concept of charisma illustrate the need to go beyond describing co-variation in order to explain the alleged process of construction. In an article entitled 'The Social Construction of Charisma', Roy Wallis claims 'to demonstrate empirically, Weber's view that charisma is not an inherent property of an individual, but of a social relationship, situationally generated' (Wallis, 1982, p. 38). Yet Wallis offers a very sparse account of the process of construction, consisting primarily of an assertion that charismatic relationships develop through 'a psychological exchange of affection, encouragement and security on the part of the leader for deference and affection on the part of the follower' (Wallis, 1982, pp. 26, 27). His evidence consists entirely of a biographical account of a single leader of one New Religious Movement. It comes as no surprise that Wallis is able to find the 'exchange of affection… for… affection' that he seeks. His narrative emphasis on social exchanges that resonate with his theoretical perspective offers the same support for his constructionist view of charisma that a hagiographic account would offer for a naïve realist view. The same story could be told in ways that support a different theory.

A similar problem undermines the claims made in Daryl and Kendall White's article 'Charisma, Structure, and Contested Authority: The Social Construction of Authenticity in Mormonism' (White and White, 1996). Apart from the title and the abstract, the term 'social construction' occurs twice in the paper, once in the introduction and once in the conclusion. The elaboration of theory consists of a perfunctory nod to Weber's concept of the routinisation of charisma and of occasional appeals to concepts such as centralisation, institutionalisation, legitimation and hegemony. As with Wallis' article, what is missing is a more detailed account of the process of construction such that the data presented could serve to verify (or, ideally, potentially to falsify) specific claims regarding the role of discourse and social relations in producing charisma. Readers can agree or disagree with the claim that something is constructed, but these arguments provide no evidence, merely a possible interpretation.

The case is very different with Anthony Blasi's *Making Charisma: The Social Construction of Paul's Public Image* (1991). Blasi is a sociologist who considers himself a 'scientist', in contrast to 'religionists' (Blasi, 1995). In his book he draws on symbolic interactionism and the work of Georges Gurvitch to specify his approach to constructionism, and he uses his findings to reflect critically on Weber's conception of charisma. Blasi's argument is not beyond criticism. He concludes by 'reconceptualizing' Weber's analysis based on his (Blasi's) finding that Paul's charisma was constructed by the next generation in a moderate rather than extreme form (see Blasi, 1991, pp. 143ff.). Blasi argues that, according to Weber, this 'rationalizing force' should be found only in the institutional routinisation of charisma. He claims to find that the charisma cooled off too much before routinisation.

Two important critiques present themselves. First, Blasi can be faulted for not paying sufficient account to a wider variety of social and historical factors that might provide alternative explanations. For example, he notes that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* were seen as marginal, but his explanation is limited and self-serving: he holds that they were ignored because they presented too exalted a view of Paul's charisma. Perhaps, but it is important to consider alternative explanations, including reactions to the portrayal of atypical roles for women and to the implicit sanctioning of baptism outside the hierarchical church. Second, Blasi's focus is on the 'posthumous charisma' constructed by Paul's followers after his death. He finds fault with Weber's distinction between personal charisma and its routinisation because he finds here a personal charisma distinct from the person. A Weberian might reply that Blasi's account is a description of the first phase of the institutional routinisation of charisma, in which case he has supported rather than criticised Weber's view. Critical comments aside, Blasi's book is a valuable model of constructionism because the theory is laid out clearly, a wide range of material is brought to bear on the issue, and the findings serve to modify the theory in the face of anomalies that arise during the analysis.

Weber's view of charisma provides a paradigm case for developing constructionist analyses. Weber developed his views in conscious opposition to Rudolph Sohm's realist analysis of the spiritual gifts of Jesus, Paul and other teachers in the early Church (see Haley, 1980). For Sohm, charisma is a real spiritual gift that causes faith; for Weber, 'on the contrary, charisma is an ulterior, socially constructed reality, the result of popular faith rather than its cause' (see Smith, 1998, p. 35). Weber's analyses, though sometimes unclear and contradictory, are rich and nuanced enough to emphasise both the conservative and the anti-traditionalist functions of charisma (see Riesebrodt, 1999). But it is irresponsible to use the concept of charisma as if its precise significance and theoretical implications can be taken for granted. The problem with many appeals to the concept is a failure to clarify the processes by which charisma is constructed. This is an example of the more general need to make explicit the nature and implications of theory in studies that appeal to the concept of construction.

Comparing Catherine Bell's uses of 'construction' in her two books on ritual emphasises both the move towards more effective theoretical development and the need for greater specification and clarity. In both books Bell explores a number of dimensions of the historical and cultural contingency of ritual, emphasising both discursive and social factors. The earlier book, *Ritual*

Theory, Ritual Practice uses the ideas of construction, generation and constitution in overlapping ways (see Bell, 1992, pp. 25, 29, 49–52, 54). (This slippage between apparent synonyms is often a sign that theory could be clearer in constructionist work.) Bell draws on work in hermeneutics to argue that object, method and subject–object relationships are constructed (see Bell, 1992, pp. 50, 51). This appeal supports her claim that theory and method are constructed (see Bell 1992, pp. 14, 16, 52). This claim in turn leads to her top-level claims that ritual, meaning and discourse are constructs (see Bell, 1992, pp. 19, 30, 47). The lack of clearly articulated constructionist theory leaves unclear the relations among these levels of claims. The dominant form of constructionist theory holds that objects and ideas are constructed through discursive and social processes. In Bell's book, ritual, discourse and social relations are all constructs. Though she rightly notices the circularity, a more limited focus would mesh theory with method more effectively. Bell's exploration of the circularity of these constructive relations is valuable, but a more clearly articulated theory would be needed to keep the web of relations clear.

Bell's later book, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, is stronger in two senses: it makes more explicit and effective use of theory, and it limits its constructionist claims to a more specific context. However, it still makes such sweeping claims that it is unable to reflect back on the strength or weakness of that theory. Her primary claims remain that ritual is a construct and that it constructs (see Bell, 1997, pp. ix, 144, 251, 252, 263–66). In this book she draws explicitly on Berger's constructionist theory (see Bell, 1997, pp. 251, 252, 257; cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 72ff.). She situates her constructionist claims primarily in the more limited and appropriate context of 'ritual reification' (see Bell, 1997, pp. 253–267). However, these improvements in theoretical clarity are limited by a decision to present apparently all relevant factors as constructs rather than to limit the scope to clearly explaining how one set of factors constructs another. Bell attempts to capture the circularity of the constructive role of ritual as construct, which is an admirable goal but which muddies the water (see Bell, 1997, pp. 81, 265, 266). It remains unclear how constructionist theory applies. Where Berger and Luckmann argue that knowledge is constructed through socially mediated processes and institutions, especially roles, Bell's argument is much more sweeping. She holds that socially situated processes construct tradition, values, categories, discourse and meaning, hence all theories, all of which in turn construct ritual; ritual in turn constructs cultural images, dispositions and situations as well as community, identity, ethnicity, gender and power, hence reality and worlds (see Bell, 1997, pp. 75, 83, 86, 101, 144, 167, 225, 251, 252, 263–66). This web of claims offers an insightful interpretation of the significance of ritual, but it overreaches, missing an opportunity to make claims that would allow for confirmation or falsification by parallel studies.

Social scientific explanations distinguish clearly between dependent and independent variables. The lack of this distinction seems to characterise the web of 'constructs' that we find in many appeals to constructionism in religious studies. A more limited examination of the construction of ritual through specific discursive or social processes, or of the role of ritual in constructing specific social forms, would go beyond a sketch of a complex whole of mutually constructed parts to a more properly social scientific analysis of one piece of the puzzle.

The most significant appeal to constructionism in recent work on religion is found in arguments that the category 'religion' itself is a modern, Western construct. Here again, greater clarification of theory is needed. Eric Sharpe states that 'religion' 'is an intellectual construction, a device through which the rationalist passion for classifying and pigeonholing expresses itself'

(Sharpe, 1983, p. 46). Russell McCutcheon criticises the Eliadean ‘construction of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon’ and suggests that ‘religion is no more and no less a scholarly construct than are politics, economics, culture, plants, continents, and mammals’ (McCutcheon, 1998, pp. 74, 207). Daniel Dubuisson argues that ‘the West invented religion and has continuously lived under its influence’; religion is ‘a unique historical construction that could have been different or might not have been at all’ (Dubuisson, 2003, pp. 12, 13). Timothy Fitzgerald holds that the ‘word ‘‘religion’’ has become analytically irrelevant’: ‘‘religion’ derives its plausibility and apologetics as a genuinely viable analytic category … from its mystifying function in western liberal capitalist ideology’; and this modern function of ‘religion’ has its inverse in ‘the neutral, factual sphere, ‘the secular’ … [which] is itself an ideological construction’ (Fitzgerald, 2000, pp. 197, 6).

This work goes beyond critique to specify alternatives to ‘religion’ as a category. McCutcheon redefines ‘religion’ in terms of discourses used to authorise contingent social worlds (see McCutcheon, 2001, pp. 25, 139, 239). Fitzgerald proposes that Mark Juergensmeyer’s concept of ‘ideologies of order’ would be preferable in many contexts and, in others, a shift to more limited analysis of ritual would better ‘help us to understand the mechanism of ideological reproduction’ (McCutcheon, 2000, pp. 107, 195). Dubuisson proposes that the concept of ‘cosmographic formations’ sidesteps Western presuppositions and is more useful for cross-cultural work (2003).

These various projects usefully shift attention to issues of ideology, order and power, but several problems arise. (1) The argument often skips a step, proceeding from the obvious premise that ‘religion’ is historically and culturally contingent to the debatable conclusion that the term should be abandoned. A concept can be both contingent and useful. What is missing is a clearer account of how ‘religion’ came to be constructed with its various degrees of contingency and what implications this construction has for its use in a specific historical, cultural and institutional context.[6] (2) In a related move, arguments that ‘religion’ is a construct often jump from the premise of contingency to a relativist conclusion. A concept can both be contingent and refer to real phenomena. Again, a clearer attention to what raw materials are used in what specific process of construction is missing. (3) This work tends to abandon the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’. (These broader views of ‘religion’, whether using that term or a replacement, include ‘secular’ political phenomena.) This retreat from the long-held trench has two problematic implications. First, it prompts the usual complex and still unanswered questions regarding the relation between insider/naive and outsider/scholarly claims—that is, between what is called ‘religion’ and what it ‘really’ is. Second, it undermines the institutional status of the field. Why fund a department of religion when it just studies ideology and political scientists, as do sociologists? The recent flurry of claims of ‘religion is a construct’ has been useful in directing attention to ideological issues, but, lacking a clearer elaboration of constructionist theory, readers can be forgiven for responding, ‘So what?’

In sum, constructionist work in religious studies seldom warrants the name because the operative concept, ‘construction’, is often not defined, the theory is not explicitly developed, and the characteristics and relative value of a constructionist approach are not contrasted clearly to an alternative position. Interpreting contextual variation is very different from explaining it. Describing religious phenomena as context-bound, historically elaborated and culture-specific begs the question that lies at the heart of constructionism: how do discourse and other social processes selectively constrain or facilitate certain kinds of human action or social phenomena?

---

[6] Fitzgerald and Asad offer the most useful steps in this direction, though gaps remain. Asad, for example, in his influential essay, ‘The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category’, argues that the possibility and authoritative status of religious phenomena ‘are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces’ (Asad, 1993, p. 54). We need a richer account of these historically distinctive disciplines and forces.

As a result, in the study of religion, constructionism sometimes denotes little more than a general allegiance to theoretical assumptions that are shared by most scholars of religion. On the one hand the label ‘social constructionism’ is often claimed by works that describe or compare social, historical or cultural variations of religious phenomena without addressing the mechanism(s) of this variation. Alleged constructs are examined, but the process of construction is taken for granted. On the other hand basic theoretical work in the field often shares similar characteristics with no explicit appeal to constructionism. For example, much of the scholarship on ‘purity’ in Hinduism has been shaped by the tension between Louis Dumont’s structuralist and McKim Marriott’s transactional models, both of which are, broadly speaking, constructionist. Dumont’s dualist structuralist stance explores the discursive and social constitution of hierarchy in a comparative context (see Dumont, 1970; see also Dumont, 1976). Marriott denies the dualism but explores the contingent constitution of purity through social and discursive processes (see Marriott, 1976, 1990).

Simply to describe religious phenomena as context-bound, historically developed and culture-specific begs the question: how does discourse selectively constrain or facilitate certain kinds of human action or social phenomena? The assertion that one has uncovered some construction is an empty claim unless the process is clarified and a theoretical perspective put on the table alongside the data that it selects. Anyone can recognise contingent correlations. The hard part is to explain them.

Beyond theorising in black and white

The third point of clarification is that of the relation of constructionism to other theoretical approaches in the field. Constructionism frames different spectra of theoretical issues. A given theory of religion could be situated along a spectrum from relativist to realist, from reductionist to essentialist, or from explanatory to interpretive. Along each of these axes and others, a given theory could take an extreme or intermediate position. Constructionism does not rule out realism. Nor does a theory that emphasises naturalist elements necessarily rule out some place for supernatural ones. Moreover, an extreme position on one theoretical axis does not necessitate an extreme position on any other. For example, a realist position can be reductionist or *sui generis* or somewhere in between. In sum, most discussions of theory of religion fail to see the full spectrum of theoretical possibilities, preferring to portray things in black and white terms.

Russell McCutcheon’s work illustrates the need to keep the various axes of theory distinct. McCutcheon presents constructionist and *sui generis* discourses on religion as sharply opposed contraries (see McCutcheon, 1997, pp. 15, 128, 129, 193; McCutcheon, 2001, pp. 10, 26, 60, 61, 85ff.). He characterises the sui generis position as holding that religious phenomena constitute an autonomous realm, not derived from or reducible to economic or social phenomena. As corollaries, he asserts that the study of religion tends to draw on vague concepts to define its object of study, such as the ultimate, the sacred, the mysterious; it favours an intuitive hermeneutic methodology; it prioritises the insider's perspective; and its product is a series of personalistic and nonfalsifiable claims (see McCutcheon, 1997, pp. 53, 124, 197). The consequences of the alleged dominance of this approach to the study of religion are a neglect of 'difference, history and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity' (McCutcheon, 1997, p. 3). For McCutcheon, the danger of such naive theorising is the potential self-destruction of the field of religious studies. Appeals to the ineffable and nonfalsifiable have little to offer beyond parochial debates and are thus less likely to secure funding. The untestable claim that 'religion' refers to distinct phenomena cannot offer a bulwark against erosion and collapse of departments of religion, with scholars reassigned and hired to fit into other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities and into area studies (see McCutcheon, 1997, p. 204). According to McCutcheon, 'The challenge, then, is either to reconstruct the study of religion without *sui generis* religion or allow it to dissolve into the various fields from which it originally developed' (McCutcheon, 1997, p. 210).

For McCutcheon and others, the reconstruction of the study of religion necessitates a constructionist, reductionist and naturalist approach that will allow scholars of religion to put forward testable claims that take account of the social, economic and political contexts of religion. This approach in turn will allow the discipline to solidify its institutional position, in part through forging connections with other disciplines, and it would allow scholars of religion to play a more effective critical role on the public stage (see McCutcheon, 1997, pp. 17, 208, 210; see also McCutcheon, 2000, 2001).

McCutcheon's argument, however, is unclear (see Engler, 2004). It is misleading to conflate constructionist with reductionist with naturalist approaches to the study of religion. The approaches are not equivalent. By implying that there is a unified alternative to '*sui generis* religion', McCutcheon presents a mutually antagonistic and exclusive dichotomy between theoretical approaches.[7] This strategy does little service to the field. Catherine Bell notes that the institutional place of religious studies might be rendered more credible 'if scholars of religion ease[d] up on the polemics of fear and threat that frame scholarly objectivity by virtue of some polar opposite' (Bell, 1996, p. 189). McCutcheon's criticisms are insightful and valuable, but the metatheoretical landscape is more nuanced than he tends to suggest.

Relations among constructionist, reductionist and naturalist approaches are contingent. (Their linkage is a construct of current debates and positions in the field.) So, for example, constructionist positions can be realist, premised on the reality of the raw materials that form the basis of the construction process. Or they can be relativist, arguing that religious phenomena are entirely context dependent and are nothing but constructions.

On another metatheoretical axis, a reductionist position can be *sui generis*. *Sui generis* stances are generally framed as necessarily essentialist, based on a realist view of the referents of theological language or of phenomenological appeals to the sacred, the holy, or the numinous. On this view *sui*

---

[7] See, for example, McCutcheon's exchange with Brian Rennie (see McCutcheon, 1998, 1999; Rennie, 1998). Sparked by McCutcheon's extreme formulation of the issues, this exchange resembles a similar straw doll showdown in another corner of the constructionist debate: the frequently cited 'Death and Furniture' exchange concerning relativism in *History of the Human Sciences* (see Edwards et al., 1995; O'Neill, 1995).

generis and reductionist perspectives would be mutually exclusive. But this claim is simply not the case. '*Sui generis*' simply implies that the objects of religion or the discipline's methods or theories are distinctive (see Pyysiäinen, 2004). There is no a *priori* reason that one cannot argue that religious phenomena are reducible to a set of phenomena still *unique to religion*. We cannot dismiss out of hand the possibility that the raw materials of religion, or the theories and methods for analysing how religious phenomena are constituted from these raw materials, are of their own genus, uniquely religious or uniquely constructed as 'religious'. Once the sacred is reduced to something else, the question of the status of that something else is one for further research.

Recent research into the neuro-physiological basis of religion offers a potential example (see Andresen et al., 2000; Newberg et al., 2001; McNamara, 2001). Some of this work concludes that the activity of specific regions of the brain gives rises to uniquely religious experiences. In other words, this work may serve as the basis for a reductionist, realist, *sui generis* theory of religion: religious phenomena are explained by reference to neuro-physiological ones—by reduction—but these neuro-physiological states are uniquely associated with religious phenomena. Moreover, a constructionist theory could argue that these neural processes give rise through linguistically and socially mediated processes to a variety of context-specific manifestations (see Lawson and McCauley, 1990, pp. 180, 181; Benavides, 2001, p. 105). This theory would be reductionist, naturalist, *sui generis* and constructionist. Neuro-scientific research is just one example that calls into question frequent assumptions that *sui generis* approaches to religion are necessarily realist or that constructionist approaches are necessarily anti-realist.

Rational choice theory, to take a different example, is reductionist, privileging economic analysis (see Stark and Bainbridge, 1996), but it is consistent with a *sui generis* and realist view of the values that inform religious compensators (see Young, 1997). It might be argued that realism is beside the point here and that the *sui generis* nature of religious compensators may indicate no more than 'supernatural assumptions … not readily accessible to unambiguous evaluation' (Bainbridge, 1997, p. 11). The point remains: a naturalistic, reductionistic approach does not necessarily rule out realist or *sui generis* theories of religion. Nothing prevents us logically from asserting both that God, or the sacred, exists and that human beings act on the basis of rational choices based on the availability and distribution of religious goods.

There is no a *priori* disjunction, or conjunction, among *sui generis*, reductionist, naturalist, realist and constructionist characteristics of theories of religion. The position of a given theory along these and other axes is not constrained at the outset. It may, of course, become constrained as relations between theory and data work themselves out. For example, Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2004) argues that the concept of '*sui generis*' as used in the theory of religion suffers from vagueness. He clarifies several distinct *sui generis* theories and argues that each fails: 'religion seems to be too heterogeneous a phenomenon to be *sui generis* in any explicable sense'. However, we must distinguish between arguing that a theory is not viable in the face of the data and formulating the theory in the first place. The range of potential theories of religion is much broader than is generally recognised. This is not to say that more theory is better. But when unexamined metatheoretical assumptions rule certain approaches out of bounds, it is worth asking what is ignored. As noted, the naive opposition of constructionism and realism blocks important questions about how historical and social context shape and are shaped by religious phenomena.

Theoretical labels—*sui generis*, reductionist, naturalist, realist, essentialist, constructionist—do more harm than good if they blind us to important avenues in the interpretation and explanation of religion. A hypothetical example will consolidate this point: a constructionist theory could include African or Confucian ancestors in the network of social relations that constructs religious phenomena. It might limit itself theoretically and methodologically to a rigorous application of social exchange theory with elements of symbolic interactionism. This theory could be reductionist, constructionist, *sui generis* and realist/essentialist regarding otherworldly phenomena. The issue is not whether we should develop such a theory but simply that the theoretical labels do not prevent us from doing so. The study of religion ignores potentially valuable intermediate positions along the many axes of theory.

Conclusion

The mix of theoretical characteristics in theories of religion is constrained not by logical necessity but by historical trajectories and ideological interests. For example, constructionism does not rule out realism, nor does reductionism rule out *sui generis* views. Yet many discussions in the study of religion take these misleading metatheoretical claims for granted. This is not free play but a practical recognition that certain possibilities are neglected, certain paths not explored. The relative absence of such theories as constructionist realism or *sui generis* reductionism is an empirical fact, not a theoretical necessity.

I do not mean to suggest that these theories are necessarily valuable or that theoretical plenitude is good in itself. Rather, investigating the way in which certain possibilities have been overlooked may well tell us something valuable about the field itself. Investigating blind spots leads us to reflect upon the social location and interestedness of theory. This is where a constructionist genealogy of constructionism would find its purchase. The fact that scholars of religion tend to emphasise extreme formulations along theoretical axes is itself worthy of investigation. A key factor here is the portrayal of constructionism as the other of religion's two realisms: a theological foot resting on God and a phenomenological foot resting on the sacred. Yet constructionism neither pulls the rug out from under religion nor tries to pull us up by our bootstraps. It simply notes that the grounds are already landscaped.

Portraying constructionism and reductionism as the antagonists of essentialist and *sui generis* views elides a central question in the study of religion: How is difference produced and maintained? Constructionist studies that aim to explain specific elements of contingency on the basis of clearly articulated theories and appropriate methods are useful in addressing this question.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Robert Segal, Gustavo Benavides and Titus Hjelm for valuable comments on previous drafts, and Robin Downey for recommending and clarifying a number of relevant works in the field of science and technology studies.

References

Aagaard-Mogensen, L., Pinxten, R., Vandamme, F. (Eds.), 1987. Worldmaking's Ways. Communications and Cognition, Ghent.

Andresen, J., Forman, R.K.C., Wilber, K. (Eds.), 2000. Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Religious Experience. Imprint Academic, Exeter.

Asad, T., 1993. Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Bainbridge, W.S., 1997. The Sociology of Religious Movements. Routledge, London and New York.

Balboa, J.R., 1998. Church dogmatics, natural theology, and the slippery slope of Geslecht: a constructivist–gay liberationist reading of Barth. Journal of the American Academy of Religion 66, 771–798.

Bauerlein, M., 2001. Social constructionism: philosophy for the academic workplace. Partisan Review 68, 228–241.

Baumeister, R.F., 1987. How the self became a problem: a psychological review of historical research. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 52, 163–176.

Bell, C., 1992. Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

Bell, C., 1996. Modernism and postmodernism in the study of religion. Religious Studies Review 22, 179–190.

Bell, C., 1997. Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

Benavides, G., 1997. Postmodern disseminations and cognitive constraints. Religion 27, 129–138.

Benavides, G., 2000. What raw materials are used in the manufacture of religion? Culture and Religion 1, 113–122.

Benavides, G., 2001. Religious studies between science and ideology. Religious Studies Review 31, 105–108.

Berger, P.L., Pullberg, S., 1965. Reification and the sociological critique of consciousness. History and Theory 4, 196–211.

Berger, P.L., Luckmann, T., 1966. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

Berger, P.L., 1967. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. Anchor Books, New York.

Berger, P.L., Kellner, H., 1993. Marriage and the construction of reality. In: Kurt Finsterbusch, K., Schwartz, J.S. (Eds.), Sources: Notable Selections in Sociology. Dushkin Publishing Group, Guildford, CT, pp. 245–256.

Berlin, B., Kay, P., 1969. Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Bijker, W.E., 1995. Sociohistorical technology studies. In: Jasanoff, S., Markle, G.E., Petersen, J.C., Pinch, T. (Eds.), Handbook of Science and Technology Studies. Sage, London, pp. 229–256.

Blasi, A.J., 1991. Making Charisma: The Social Construction of Paul's Public Image. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ.

Blasi, A.J., 1995. The trouble with religious studies: why scientific claims in the study of religions should be left to symbolic interactionists and other scientists. Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7, 251–258.

Bloor, D., Barnes, B., 1996. Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Analysis. Athlone, London.

Bowie, A., 1998. Introduction. In: Schleiermacher, F. (Ed.), Hermeneutics and Criticism And Other Writings. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. vii–xxxi.

Braun, W., McCutcheon, R.T. (Eds.), 2000. Guide to the Study of Religion. Cassell, London and New York.

Burr, V., 1995. An Introduction to Social Constructionism. Routledge, London and New York.

Clarke, L., 2001. The Shī'ī construction of taqlīd. Journal of Islamic Studies 12, 40–64.

Collins, H., Pinch, T., 1993. The sun in a test tube: the story of cold fusion. In: The Golem: What Everyone Should Know About Science, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge pp. 57–78.

Despland, M., 1991. The sacred: the French evidence. Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 3, 41–46.

Despland, M., 1998. Les Hiérarchies Sont Ébranlées: Politiques et Théologies au XIX^{e} Siècle. Fides, Québec.

Despland, M., 1999. Constructions modernes de la religion: l'exemple de Volney. Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 28, 23–33.

Dubuisson, D., 2003. The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology. Trans. by Sayers, W. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Dumont, L., 1970. Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications. Trans. by Sainsbury, M. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Dumont, L., 1976. Homo Aequalis. Gallimard, Paris.

Edwards, D., Ashmore, M., Potter, J., 1995. Death and furniture: the rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism. History of the Human Sciences 8, 25–49.

Engler, S., 2004. Review of Russell McCutcheon, critics not caretakers: redescribing the public study of religion. Journal of Religion 84, 150–151.

Feenberg, A., 2002. Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Fitzgerald, T., 2000. The Ideology of Religious Studies. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Fujimura, J.H., 2000. Transnational genomics. In: Reid, R., Traweek, S. (Eds.), Doing Science + Culture. Routledge, London and New York, pp. 71–92.

Gergen, K.J., 1985. The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. American Psychologist 40, 266–275.

Goodman, N., 1978. Ways of Worldmaking. Hackett, Indianapolis.

Habermas, J., 1984 [1981]. The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Trans. by McCarthy, T. Beacon Press, Boston.

Hacking, I., 1998. On being more literal about construction. In: Velody, I., Williams, R. (Eds.), The Politics of Constructionism. Sage, London, pp. 49–68.

Hacking, I., 1999. The Social Construction of What? Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London.

Haley, P.D., 1980. Rudolf Sohm on charisma. Journal of Religion 60, 185–197.

Hardin, C.L., Maffi, L., 1997. Color Categories in Thought and Languages. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Harding, S. (Ed.), 1993. The Racial Economy of Science. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Harding, S., 1998. Is Science Multi-Cultural: Post-colonialism, Feminisms and Epistemologies. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Harré, R. (Ed.), 1986. The Social Construction of Emotions. Blackwell, Oxford.

Hilbert, D.R., 1987. Color and Color Perception: A Study in Anthropological Realism. Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, CA.

Hinton, A.L., 1999. Biocultural Approaches to the Emotions. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Hirsch, P.M., Boal, K.B., 2000. Whose social construction? Berger and Luckmann revisited. Journal of Management Inquiry 9, 256.

Holzner, B., 1972. Reality Construction in Society. Schenkman, Cambridge, MA.

Juschka, D.M., 1999. The construction of pedagogical spaces: religious studies in the university. Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 28, 85–97.

Kaiser, P.K., Boynton, R.M., 1996. Human Color Vision, second ed. Optical Society of America, Washington, DC.

Keller, E.F., Longino, H.E. (Eds.), 1996. Feminism and Science. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

Kuhn, T., 1970. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Kusserow, A.S., 1999. Crossing the great divide: anthropological theories of the western self. Journal of Anthropological Research 55, 541–562.

Latour, B., Woolgar, S., 1986. Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts. Sage, London.

Lawson, E.T., McCauley, R.N., 1990. Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Leming, M.R., 1989. Is faith a social construction? In: Leming, M.R., DeVrie, R.G., Furnish, B.F.J., (Eds.), The Sociological Perspective: A Value-Committed Introduction. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 155–167.

Lutz, C., 1986. The anthropology of emotions. Annual Review of Anthropology 15, 405–436.

Lynch, M., 1998. Towards a constructivist genealogy of social constructivism. In: Velody, I., Williams, R. (Eds.), The Politics of Constructionism. Sage, London, pp. 13–32.

Lynch, O.M., 1990. The social construction of emotion in India. In: Lynch, O.M. (Ed.), Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 3–34.

MacDonald, W., 1992. Idionecrophanies: the social construction of perceived contact with the dead. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 31, 215–223.

Maines, D.R., 2000. Charting futures for sociology: culture and meaning: the social construction of meaning. Contemporary Sociology 29, 577–584.

Margolin, F.A., Margolin, S.A. (Eds.), 1990. Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance. Clarendon, Oxford.

Markley, R., 1992. The irrelevance of reality: science, ideology and the postmodern universe. Genre 25, 249–276.

Markus, H.R., Kitayama, S., 1991. Culture and the self: implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. Psychological Review 98, 224–253.

Marriott, M., 1976. Hindu transactions: diversity without dualism. In: Kapferer, B. (Ed.), Transaction and Meaning. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia.

Marriott, M. (Ed.), 1990. India Through Hindu Categories. Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies 5. Sage, Delhi.

McCutcheon, R.T., 1997. Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

McCutcheon, R.T., 1998. Review of Brian S. Rennie, Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion. Religion 28, 92–97.

McCutcheon, R.T., 1999. Of straw men and humanists: a reply to Brian Rennie. Religion 29, 91–92.

McCutcheon, R.T., 2000. Review of Bruce Lincoln, Authority: Construction And Corrosion. Religion 30, 82–85.

McCutcheon, R.T., 2001. Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion. State University of New York Press, Albany.

McNamara, P., 2001. Religion and the frontal lobes. In: Andresen, J. (Ed.), Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 237–256.

Nanda, M., 1998. The epistemic charity of the social constructivist critics of science and why the third world should refuse the offer. In: Koertge, N. (Ed.), A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, pp. 286–311.

Nanda, M., 2000. The science wars in India. In: The Editors of Lingua Franca (Ed.), The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, pp. 205–213.

Newberg, A., D'Aquili, E.G., Rause, V., 2001. Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief. Ballantine, New York.

O'Neill, J., 1995. 'I gotta use words when I talk to you': a response to death and furniture. History of the Human Sciences 8, 99–106.

O'Neill, O., 1989. Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Pennington, B.K., 2001. Constructing colonial dharma: a chronicle of emergent Hinduism, 1830–1831. Journal of the American Academy of Religion 69, 577–603.

Pickering, A., 1994. Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Pinch, T.J., Bijker, W.E., 1987. The social construction of facts and artifacts: or how the sociology of science and the sociology of technology might benefit each other. In: Bijker, W.E., Hughes, T.P., Pinch, T.J. (Eds.), The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 17–50.

Pyysiäinen, I., 2004. Religion – sui generis but in what sense? In: Magic, Miracles, and Religion:, A Scientist's Perspective Alta Mira, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Raphael, M., 1994. Feminism, constructivism and numinous experience. Religious Studies 30, 511–526.

Rennie, B.S., 1998. Manufacturing the sui generis discourse: a response to Russell McCutcheon. Religion 28, 413–414.

Riesebrodt, M., 1999. Charisma in Max Weber's sociology of religion. Religion 29, 1–14.

Sampson, E.E., 1988. The debate on individualism: indigenous psychologies of the individual and their role in personal and societal functioning. American Psychologist 43, 15–22.

Segovia, F.F., 1995. The significance of social location in reading John's story. Interpretation 49, 370–378.

Sharpe, E.J., 1983. Understanding Religion. Duckworth, London.

Smith, D.N., 1998. Faith, reason, and charisma: Rudolf Sohm, Max Weber, and the theology of grace. Sociological Inquiry 68, 32–60.

Smith, J.Z., 1978. Map Is Not Territory. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Smith, J.Z., 1982. Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Smith, J.Z., 1988. Religion and 'religious studies': no difference at all. Soundings 71, 231–244.

Smith, J.Z., 1995. Religious studies: whither (wither) and why? Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7, 407–413.

Smith, J.Z., 1998. Religion, religions, religious. In: Taylor, M.C. (Ed.), Critical Terms for Religious Studies. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 269–284.

Sokal, A.D., 1996a. Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity. Social Text 14, 217–252.

Sokal, A.D., 1996b. A physicist experiments with cultural studies. Lingua Franca 6, 62–64.

Stark, R., Bainbridge, W.S., 1996. A Theory of Religion. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ.

Turnbull, D., 1994. Maps are Territories: Science is an Atlas. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Urban, H.B., 1999. The extreme orient: the construction of 'tantrism' as a category in the orientalist imagination. Religion 29, 123–146.

Wallis, R., 1982. The social construction of charisma. Social Compass 29, 25–39.

White, D., White Jr., O.K., 1996. Charisma, structure, and contested authority: the social construction of authenticity in Mormonism. Religion and the Social Order 6, 93–112.

Yates, P., 1998. The social construction of priesthood. Theology 101, 13–22.

Young, L.A., 1997. Phenomenological images of religion and rational choice theory. In: Young, L.A. (Ed.), Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment. Routledge, London and New York, pp. 133–145.

Steven Engler is an Instructor in the Department of Humanities, Mount Royal College, Calgary. This current research is primarily in the area of theory of religion, with recent articles appearing in NUMEN and CULTURAL STUDIES.