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## Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications

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### Abstract

The article explores recent approaches to historical analysis of discourse that have been developed in disciplines such as the sociology of knowledge and historical epistemology. These approaches have only sporadically been taken seriously in the academic study of religion, although they have a great potential to establish a study of religion that is both academically rigorous and aware of its societal and historical contexts and limitations. The article defines the necessary concepts for a discursive study of religion as an hermeneutical discipline that scrutinizes and historicizes the societal organization of knowledge about religion. This discourse on religion—defined here as RELIGION—generates, legitimizes, and maintains meaning structures and societal realities. The discourse-historical analysis of RELIGION is not itself a method but a research perspective. Nevertheless, this perspective implies several steps in designing a research project that the article describes with concrete examples.

### Keywords

discursive study of religion, historical discourse analysis, social constructivism, definitions of religion, sociology of knowledge

Although established as an independent discipline at European universities more than one hundred years ago, the academic study of religion is still wrestling with severe problems of identity and legitimization. The reasons for this challenging situation are partly related to developments in the academic landscape that have influenced many 'small disciplines' in the second half of the twentieth century; but they are also related to the fact that religion has played a very special role in the scientific, political, and cultural debates of the past 250 years. Unlike 'law,' 'health,' 'economy,' and other concepts that appear more innocent at first glance, the concept of 'religion' is charged with difficulties that have thrown its study into contestation. The study of religion is particularly challenged in regard to its link to theology and thus to confessional or

experiential approaches to religion, its link to colonial agendas that imposed a Eurocentric view on non-Western cultures, as well as the tendencies in influential parts of the discipline to essentialize religion as something *sui generis*. One of the most important theoretical and methodological questions today is whether the discipline can respond to these fundamental challenges in a way that takes these critiques seriously and is able to transform the study of religion into an academic discipline that operates within a rigorous and self-reflective interpretational framework. Given the ubiquitous presence of religion in the cultural global worlds of the twenty-first century, there should be no doubt that we need experts who are trained to scrutinize the history and present appearance of religion in a sound academic way.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I argue that the notion of ‘discourse’ is of particular value if we are to establish such a self-reflective academic discipline. Although basic considerations about a *discursive study of religion* were made already in the 1980s (Kippenberg 1983; Lincoln 1989; see also Kippenberg 1992 and Lincoln 2005 [1996]), these suggestions have not been picked up in a more general way, attempting to build a serious referential framework for a (self-)critical study of religion. Recently, we have witnessed a rich discussion in neighboring disciplines, mainly in sociology and historiography, about the usefulness of discursive analysis. German and French scholars, in particular, have readdressed the theories of discourse, which were developed by Michel Foucault and others a generation earlier, and made them fruitful for the study of cultural phenomena in the twenty-first century. The academic study of religion has only sporadically taken notice of these new approaches to the study of discourse that break down the boundaries between academic disciplines—and even between the humanities and the natural sciences—in a most fruitful and promising way. More recent publications show that there is a growing interest in discourse theory, including its application to the study of religion, though most contributions still base themselves on linguistic and textual analyses of discourse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is a parallel with the discipline of philosophy here. Let me invoke Richard Rorty’s famous remark of 1979: “Professions can survive the paradigms which gave them birth. In any case, the need for teachers who have read the great dead philosophers is quite enough to insure that there will be philosophy departments as long as there are universities” (Rorty 1979: 393).

<sup>2</sup> English contributions include van Dijk 1985; Potter 1996; Torfing 1999; Phillips and Hardy 2002; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Fairclough 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2010. On discursive approaches in the study of religion see Murphy 2000; Moberg 2009; Taira 2010 (without defining his concepts); Wuthnow 2011 (unfortunately, despite the title, the author does not conceptualize discourse at all). See now also Hjelm 2011 who follows Fairclough’s definition of discourse as “a way of speaking that does not simply reflect or represent things ‘out there,’ but ‘constructs’ or ‘constitutes’ them” (Hjelm 2011: 135, referring to Fairclough 1992: 3; Hjelm’s explanation under “Key concepts” remains a bit vague [Hjelm 2011: 149]). Hjelm consciously chooses a linguistically

One intention of the present article is to bring the German contributions into conversation with discussions in English-speaking scholarship.

Systematically applying discursive approaches is an innovative and original contribution to a discussion that is specific for the academic study of religion. This article will thus help to resolve some of the lingering problems in the field. The approaches presented here offer a new and coherent analytical framework for an academic study of religion that has gone through the many 'turns' of the twentieth century.

Two directions of scholarly thinking, both reaching back to the first half of the twentieth century, are of special—and underestimated—importance for a new understanding of discursive approaches. For one, the contributions from the *sociology of knowledge* should more seriously be incorporated in our theoretical framework; furthermore, the *historical analysis of discourse* is something that scholars of religion need if they want to retain their strong basis in historical research. In the following, I will introduce these lines of thought that are closely related to discussions in sociology and historiography. I will then clarify the most important terms that constitute a discursive study of religion and will suggest a definition of religious discourse as a clearly demarcated object of study. Discursive study of religion provides a research perspective, rather than a single method to study religion. Nevertheless, this perspective has implications for the concrete scholarly work of designing a research project, putting together a corpus of data, and interpreting this data with the use of appropriate methods. The last section of this article provides a brief description of these steps, using concrete examples to show the potential of the discursive approach to the study of religion.

## **I. Approaches: Recent Developments in Theorizing and Analyzing Discourse**

One problem of the notion of 'discourse' is the fact that the term is used in many, and often conflicting, ways. It has further added to the confusion that many scholars do not clearly define what they mean when they use the term 'discourse.' This is not the place to provide an overview of the many different usages of the term since the nineteenth century (for such an overview see Keller 2011a: 97-177; briefly Keller 2011b: 13-58; see also Landwehr 2009: 60-90). Rather, I want to highlight the crucial contributions that come from the

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oriented approach to discourse. For a more historically oriented approach see von Stuckrad 2003a and 2010b.

sociology of knowledge and from historiographical approaches. Although they acknowledge the importance of language in the study of discourse, both approaches move beyond classical linguistic analysis (in the field of social linguistics 'discourse' refers to the more minute and specific patterns of speech in the everyday sense) and include the materiality of discursive structures. This is of particular importance for the study of religion.

### *The Discursive Construction of Knowledge*

Since the 1960s, 'knowledge' has been an important dimension in sociological and discursive theory. This is true for the influential contributions of Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Alfred Schütz on the social construction of reality and knowledge (particularly Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schütz and Luckmann 1979-1984; applied to the study of religion and media, see the overview in Krüger 2012: 11-162), but also for Michel Foucault's interest in the structures that produce shared knowledge in a given societal and historical situation. Foucault put particular emphasis on the power-structures that distinguish approved from non-approved knowledge (Foucault 1980), a focus that puts his work in a Marxist line of interpretation that is still visible in some recent, post-socialist or post-Marxist approaches to discourse theory such as those of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who emphasize the primacy of politics and the importance to solve urgent problems of our time. Jacob Torfing builds on this approach when he defines a discourse "as a relational totality of signifying sequences that determine the identity of the social elements, but never succeed in totalizing and exhausting the play of meaning" (Torfing 1999: 87). Sociologists of knowledge still include the dimension of power and the importance of politics in their analysis, but not necessarily as the main and determining dimension of discursive practice, or as expression of the need to radically reform plural democracies (in the way Laclau and Mouffe would have it; see Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 24-59; on the reception of Laclau and Mouffe in German-speaking sociology see Stäheli 1995).

Combining ideas about the social construction of reality with Foucault's understanding of discourse, this approach argues that everything we perceive, experience, and feel, but also the way we act, is structurally intertwined with socially constructed forms of approved and objectified knowledge (I summarize Keller 2011b, 58-59; see also Landwehr 2009: 91-93). We do not have an unmediated access to the world *an sich*, even though the 'robustness' of its material quality limits the spectrum of interpretation. Knowledge of the world is not an innate cognitive skill but the cultural response to symbolic systems that are provided by the social environment. These symbolic systems are

typically produced, legitimized, communicated, and transformed as discourses. Discourse analysis, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, aims at reconstructing the processes of social construction, objectification, communication, and legitimization of meaning structures. What is regarded as legitimate knowledge in a given society is generated on the level of institutions, organizations, or collective actors.

There is a close parallel between this approach to the *social organization of knowledge* and the poststructuralist positions that have reshaped postcolonial and gender studies since the 1980s (see also Mills 2004: 69-115). If you allow me an excursus into gender studies, reference must be made to Joan Wallach Scott who already in 1988 criticized the binary construction of the sex-gender division and insisted on an examination of that binary opposition itself (Scott 1988: 40). That brings her to a redefinition of 'gender':

My definition of gender has two parts and several subsets. They are interrelated but must be analytically distinct. The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. (Scott 1988: 42)

The close links between sociologies of knowledge and poststructuralist understandings of gender become fully visible when we look at Barbara Hey's variation of Scott's definition of gender, now using the German word *Geschlecht* (translatable both as sex or gender) as an analytical category that transgresses the binary construction of 'sex' and 'gender':

*Geschlecht* is knowledge of the societal relations between women and men and as such never absolute or persistent, but always dependent on context; it is controversial and instrument as well as a result of power relations. Knowledge as a way to order the world is inseparable from societal organization. Consequently, *Geschlecht* is the societal organization of gender differences [*Geschlechterdifferenz*]. But this does neither mean that it mirrors constant, natural differences nor that it enforces them. Rather, *Geschlecht* provides different meanings for these distinctions in historical, cultural, and social regard. Viewed from this perspective, the "sex/gender" distinction is misplaced. (Hey 1994, 19-20; all translations of quotations are mine)

We can learn a lot from Hey's definition of *Geschlecht* when it comes to the study of religion. But at this point, let me emphasize that the notion of knowledge here does not refer to an objective truth of the world<sup>3</sup> but to the social communication, attribution, and legitimization of what is accepted in a given society as knowledge. This knowledge can be explicit, but also implicit or tacit.

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<sup>3</sup> This constructionist concept of 'truth' goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche.

An example of tacit knowledge would be the societal consensus in the West that “democracy is better than dictatorship,” that “magic does not work,” or that “astrology is wrong”; people in Western societies can simply assume that their communication partners share this knowledge (even if it is not made explicit), and all other claims would be counter-intuitive (though not impossible, of course). Implicit or tacit knowledge is not tested or challenged (or even understood) by agents in a given society; what is more, such knowledge can change significantly from one society to another and from one historical period to another. That is why historical analysis of discourse addresses not only the explicitly available forms of knowledge (for instance, in the natural sciences) but particularly the ‘self-evident knowledge,’ the truth that is not formalized but generally accepted (see Busse 1987: 40-41). This brings us to the historical dimension of discourse analysis.

### *Historical Analysis of Discourse*

Throughout his work, Michel Foucault was interested in the genealogy, or ‘archaeology,’ of discursive structures, which naturally implies an historical dimension in his analysis of discourse (Bieder 1998; Bublitz 1999). Therefore, it is astonishing that Foucauldian approaches have only rarely been adopted in the study of religion, arguably a discipline that has a strong historiographical focus.<sup>4</sup> One reason for this may be that the notion of ‘history of religion’ is to a large extent associated with Eliadean phenomenology of religion (as a critique see McCutcheon 1998), which led to a general disregard of the category ‘history’ in the study of religion, particularly in the United States (see Kippenberg 2001; von Stuckrad 2003b; see also Lincoln 2005 [1996]).

The linguistic turn (programmatically Rorty 1967) has had deep reaching impact on all fields of cultural research. That our knowledge of the world is constituted in language and linguistic structures, and that the scholar is also an author whose narrative account does not provide a privileged access to truth, was famously argued for historiography by Hayden White (1973) and for anthropology by Clifford Geertz (1988). To be sure, large parts of historical scholarship, including scholars of religion, shunned the consequences of this reflective critique (see Vann 1998). Even today, “sources are still read as ‘documents’ of a past reality—perhaps they are read better, more diligently and critically, but nevertheless as medium with sufficient transparency” (Sarasin 2003: 32). That *historical meaning* is generated in communicative processes is

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<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad is a notable exception to this rule; see Asad 1993 and 2003. See also Masuzawa 2007 as an analysis of the history of the discourse on ‘world religions’; for ancient history see Albinus 1997; Larmour, Miller and Platter 1998; van den Heever 2006; methodologically Miller 1999.

only insufficiently acknowledged (examples of this acknowledgment include Koselleck 2004 [1979] and Rüsen 1997). Even fewer scholars include the category of *discourse* in their historical analysis, arguing that historical meaning is not 'reconstructed' from the 'facts' and 'sources' in an hermeneutical process of understanding (*Verstehen*) but discursively generated. This is exactly what Michel Foucault wanted to show in his critical reflection on our presupposition that historical truth is attainable in our accounts of it. Since Foucault, "discourse analysis can be understood as the attempt of scrutinizing the formal conditions that steer the production of meaning" (Sarasin 2003: 33; similarly Stäheli 2000: 73).

In close reference to Foucault's work and in conversation with structuralist approaches several forms of discourse analysis have emerged (Maingueneau 1991: 15 distinguishes seven for the French academic discussion; see also Bublitz et al. 1999; Bublitz 2003; Mills 2004: 1-25), some of them closer to linguistic and textual analyses than others. What they have in common is the argument that there is no 'thing' in the world that determines what is being said but that the meanings of things are generated by the chain of signifiers that the speaker is introducing.

The thing that is meant, the referent, is *as referent* of a certain linguistic sign not prior to language; rather, it is the system of signs that ultimately creates it as social reality from the "chaotic variety" [*chaotische Mannigfaltigkeit*] (Kant) of all possible things in the world: "It is the world of words that generates the world of things" [Jacques Lacan]. Something else is fundamental for discourse analysis: This is not about the abstruse question whether there is more than texts; it is about how the non-linguistic things gain their meaning. No discourse, no grid of classification, how familiar it may appear, has ever been derived 'from the things themselves'; it is the other way round and discourse and classification generate the order of things. [...] Even though practices, gestures, and objects are themselves no longer constituted in language, they are relevant in the social world only because meaning has been discursively attributed to them. (Sarasin 2003: 36; see also Busse 1987: 23; on the related concept of 'empty signifier' see Laclau 1994)

Or, in Achim Landwehr's apt remark, "at the bottom [*Grund*] of realities and discourses there is no other fundament than their own historicity. Hence, the shortest possible definition of the function of discourses must be: discourses generate realities" (Landwehr 2009: 92). We can understand the working of discursive structures only if we know their genealogy and formation. And only through comparison—in diachronic or synchronic perspective—we can see the historicity and even singularity of discourses. There are no discourses that emerge 'naturally' or that are dictated by the working of some abstract reality; historical and comparative analysis of how social communicational structures attribute meaning to the world and organize explicit and implicit knowledge is the basis of discursive approaches.

Discourses typically lead to a “shortage of possible notions [*Verknappung von Aussagemöglichkeiten*] (we cannot say everything at all times)” (Landwehr 2009: 92). Thus, the historicity of knowledge should not be misunderstood as arbitrariness. What a group of people in a given situation regards as accepted knowledge is by no means arbitrary; it is the result of discursive formations that critical scholarship can reconstruct and interpret.

This is even true for knowledge that is legitimized by empirical methods in the ‘exact sciences’ and thus based on what is seen as ‘hard facts.’ Reconstructing the conditions of knowledge in the natural sciences is the goal of *historical epistemology*, a division within the history of science that is closely related to discursive approaches. The historicity of knowledge in the natural sciences was already famously discussed by Ludwik Fleck (Fleck 1935). Edmund Husserl, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and others have contributed to this debate and helped us to understand that it is not ‘nature’ that formulates natural laws but that ‘facts’ are produced in communicative and social processes (overview in Rheinberger 2006: 21-72; see also Ashmore 1989; Ashmore, Myers and Potter 1995; Latour 2010). Under the label of *discursive constructionism*, Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn summarize what is at stake here:

Discursive constructionism (DC) is most distinctive in its foregrounding of the epistemic position of both the researcher and what is researched (texts or conversations). It studies a world of descriptions, claims, reports, allegations, and assertions as parts of human practices, and it works to keep these as the central topic of research rather than trying to move beyond them to the objects or events that seem to be the topic of such discourse. It is radically constructionist in that it is skeptical of any guarantee beyond local and contingent texts, claims, arguments, demonstrations, exercises of logic, procedures of empiricism, and so on. In this sense it can be described as antifoundationalist and poststructuralist. It takes seriously the work in rhetoric and the sociology of scientific knowledge that highlights the contingent, normative, and constructive work that goes into, say, logical demonstrations, mathematical proofs, or experimental replications. (Potter and Hepburn 2008: 275)

In a similar vein, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, who is the director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin and one of the most influential authors in the field, defines “the concept of epistemology, with reference to the French usage of the term, as the reflection on the historical conditions *under* which, and the means *with* which things are made into objects that start up the process of scientific inquiry [*Prozess der wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnisgewinnung*] and that keep this process going” (Rheinberger 2007: 11, italics original). Rheinberger exemplifies this with the history and epistemology of experimentation in the life sciences. One collaborative research project, on “A Cultural History of Heredity,” aims at “studying the juridical, medical,

cultural, technical, and scientific practices and procedures in which knowledge of heredity became materially entrenched in different ways and by which it unfolded its often unprecedented effects over a period of several centuries" (Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 2007: ix). These discourses generate "epistemic spaces" in which shared knowledge is established and legitimized.<sup>5</sup>

Put into the language of discourse theory, we can say that the practices and procedures in the natural sciences are a materialization of a discourse on, in this case, heredity. The discursive materializations, in their turn, stabilize and legitimize the discursive assumptions that have made them possible. By so doing discursive structures steer the attribution of meaning to things and establish shared assumptions about accepted and unaccepted knowledge. The example makes clear that discourse analysis breaks down the borders between the natural sciences and the social or cultural sciences. Despite their different methodologies to produce accepted knowledge, the natural sciences are no less discursively structured and thus socially steered than the humanities.

Consequently, discourse analysis argues that our knowledge is not about 'the world out there' (even if the existence of 'a world out there' is not denied) and that we should adopt a relativist, rather than a realist position in the philosophical debate that is linked to these epistemological and ontological issues. The relativist position has led to many, often highly polemical objections. Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter call the most prominent rejection the "Death and Furniture" response:

'Death' and 'Furniture' are emblems for two very common (predictable, even) objections to relativism. When relativists talk about the social construction of reality, truth, cognition, scientific knowledge, technical capacity, social structure and so on, their realist opponents sooner or later start hitting the furniture, invoking the Holocaust, talking about rocks, guns, killings, human misery, tables and chairs. The force of these objections is to introduce a bottom line, a bedrock of reality that places limits on what may be treated as epistemologically constructed or deconstructible. There are two related kinds of moves: Furniture (tables, rocks, stones, etc.—the reality that *cannot* be denied) and Death (misery, genocide, poverty, power—the reality that *should not* be denied).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 2007: 3-34; Rheinberger, Hagner and Wahrig-Schmidt 1997. Rheinberger uses the term "infra-experimentality" to indicate the close links between things and acquired knowledge: "Infra-experimentality seeks to understand the game of producing knowledge effects *under* the hands of the experimenter, in the under-world beneath him. It seeks to grasp and expose those moments—chains of events—in which matter is made to mean and scientific meaning is made to matter. If we looked for a word that could convey the corresponding methodical effort, the choice would be 'subduction.' It deals with the interface *between* the agents of knowing and the objects of their desire" (Rheinberger 2011: 337, italics original).

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Ashmore and Potter 1995: 26 (see also Potter and Hepburn 2008: 287-288; Nikander 2008: 413; more generally Parker 1998). I may add the 'hand-shaking ritual' as a variant of this

What is at stake is not “a lack of concern with that which may exist beyond discourse” (Benavides 2010: 210 in response to von Stuckrad 2010b) but an acknowledgment of the difference between something that *simply happens* (often without being reported) and something that is *made into a fact or event* by discursive and communicative procedures.

## II. Discursive Study of Religion: Concepts and Definitions

I have explained so far how recent discussions in the sociology of knowledge and the historical analysis of discourse have provided important new interpretational tools that make use of Foucauldian and poststructuralist approaches, at the same time adjusting them to their own needs and research interests. Now I turn to the question of how we can apply these considerations to the study of religion. I argue that a discursive study of religion is the most convincing form of analysis, if we want to avoid the traps and challenges that have confronted the study of religion during the twentieth century.

Before I will discuss the most important concepts and definitions, it is necessary to point out that *discourse analysis is not itself a method*. Sometimes harking back to Ludwik Fleck’s notion of *Denkstil* (“thought style,” see Fleck 1935), many theorists of discourse agree that discourse analysis is a *research perspective* or *research style* that applies a spectrum of possible methods in order to answer its guiding research question.<sup>7</sup> This is in contrast to those approaches that are focusing on linguistic analysis or what Norman Fairclough calls “textually oriented discourse analysis.”<sup>8</sup> Within the more historically oriented discourse theory that I am advocating here, and which leans more heavily on Michel Foucault’s work, the methods that are considered useful can range from philological methods to quantitative and qualitative methods,

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ritualized objection: one hour before a roundtable discussion on “Theoretical-Critical Issues in the Study of Religion” at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Gustavo Benavides shook my hand, subsequently asking during the discussion whether this event was “merely” a social construction without any basis in reality. Unfortunately, this episode is not mentioned in Benavides’ response to von Stuckrad 2010b in Benavides 2010: 209-213.

<sup>7</sup> See Sarasin 2003: 8 and 30; Bührmann and Schneider 2008:16; Nikander 2008: 414 (“Specifying DA [= Discourse Analysis] as a method in any traditional way is difficult, if not impossible. Instead, DA is often described as a methodology or as a theoretical perspective rather than a method”); Landwehr 2009: 100; Keller 2011b: 9.

<sup>8</sup> See Fairclough 1992: 37-61. If scholars choose the linguistic and textual orientation, it may be easier to talk of a ‘method,’ but it also means to limit the applicability of discourse theory. Examples for such an understanding of discourse analysis are Schiffrin 1994; Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001; Renkema 2009; Hjelm 2011 (this may be a reason why his chapter is included in the section “Methods” of the *Handbook*).

content analysis, etc. (for the study of religion, see the overview in Engler and Stausberg 2011). However, even if discourse analysis is not a specific method, it follows certain steps and rules that have proven useful in the concrete analytical work. As I will explain in the last section, these steps consist of the demarcation of the discourse under scrutiny, the collection of relevant data, and the decision of which method would be most productive in generating and interpreting the data.

### *Basic Concepts for Discourse Analysis*

Let me now clarify the terms that are most relevant for our purpose here. Making use of the recent discussion that I have outlined above, I define ‘discourses’ as follows: *Discourses are practices that organize knowledge in a given community; they establish, stabilize, and legitimize systems of meaning and provide collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social ensemble. Statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic, systematically organized and repeatedly observable, form a discourse.* Hence, the concept of discourse refers to “the regularity of fields of statements, which regulate what can be thought, said, and done” (Stäheli 2000: 73).

Consequently, ‘discourse analysis’ addresses *the relationship among communicational practices and the (re)production of systems of meaning, or orders of knowledge, the social agents that are involved, the rules, resources, and material conditions that are underlying these processes, as well as their impact on social collectives* (similarly Keller 2011b: 8).

‘Historical discourse analysis’ explores *the development of discourses in changing sociopolitical and historical settings, thus providing means to reconstruct the genealogy of a discourse.*

In addition to these fundamental terms, it is useful to introduce the concept of ‘dispositive,’ which was coined by Michel Foucault (*le dispositif*, often translated as ‘device,’ ‘deployment,’ or ‘apparatus’), but which recently has been defined more clearly in scholarly discussions. The concept moves beyond the analysis of discursive practices to include non-discursive practices and materializations,<sup>9</sup> tacit and implicit knowledge, as well as the relationship between these dimensions of social action. A dispositive is here understood as *the totality of the material, practical, social, cognitive, or normative ‘infrastructure’ in which a discourse develops.* This can include governmental decisions and laws, new technologies and media, museums, educational programs,

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<sup>9</sup> On the sometimes difficult distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive see Torfing 1999: 90-91.

television, or the healthcare system. Dispositive analysis examines how “assignments of meaning create reality” (Jäger and Meier 2010: 39; as a detailed introduction see Bührmann and Schneider 2008).

Discourses develop within cultural processes and dispositives. They form around specific topics, but many discourses also contain ‘strands’ from other discourses. For instance, the statement “The preamble of the future constitution of the European Union should refer to Christianity as Europe’s religious and philosophical roots” is linked to several discourses, particularly discourses on European identity, on constitutional law, on religion, on Christianity, and on philosophy. What we see here is that several discourses can be entangled and form a ‘discursive knot’ (Jäger and Meier 2010: 47). The notion of discursive knots reminds us of the fact that the borders of a discourse are flexible and dependent on scholarly definition, which means that *discourses do not exist ‘out there.’* They have no ontological status other than being analytical categories that the analyst of cultural processes constructs to serve her or his interpretative goal. When it comes to the link between several discourses, we can conceptualize these as “intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history of an organization or institution, and situational frames” (Reisigl and Wodak 2010: 90).

### *Consequences for a Discursive Study of Religion*

In a discursive framework of analysis, it does not make any theoretical difference whether we study religion, politics, technology, cars, animals, music, masculinity, or any other topic of social and symbolic communication that is linked to an identifiable discourse. But for the study of religion as a specialized area of research discursive approaches have implications that need to be made explicit. To begin with, religion completely loses its status of being something *sui generis*. Rather, discursive approaches study the very claim that “religion is *sui generis*” as part of a discourse on religion that has formed under identifiable historical circumstances and that has materialized in university institutions and scholarly programs, in turn stabilizing and legitimizing the attributed meaning of religion as *sui generis*.<sup>10</sup> We can historicize the discourse on *sui generis* religion; what is more, we can scrutinize the dispositives and discursive knots, which characterize this discourse and maintain the construction of

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<sup>10</sup> As a valuable attempt to provide a discursive analysis of ‘*sui generis* religion’ see McCutcheon 1997. However, McCutcheon remains ambivalent in his use of the concept of ‘discourse’ and does not clearly distinguish it from, e.g., ‘ideological strategies.’

meaning until other discourses will determine the socially communicated knowledge about religion.

Discursive approaches provide a solution to another problem, as well. It is no longer necessary—in fact, it would be counterproductive—to apply a generic definition of religion (see also von Stuckrad 2010b: 165-167). Definitions of religion are statements and utterances that attribute meaning to things and that provide orders of knowledge. As contributions to a discourse on religion, these definitions are *objects* of discursive analysis, rather than its *tools*.

Regarding the term ‘religion’ as an empty signifier that can be activated with definitions, meanings, and communicational practices does not compromise the clarity of the object nor the scholarly rigor of the study of religion. It only moves the obligation to define our objects from the level of communicational practices to the level of discursive reflection. I make this distinction visible in a change of typeface: ‘religion’ refers to contributions to a discourse on religion, while ‘RELIGION’ refers to the discourse itself.<sup>11</sup> After this clarification, we can go a step further and define RELIGION simply as follows: *RELIGION is the societal organization of knowledge about religion.*

The definitions of ‘discourse analysis’ and ‘historical discourse analysis,’ as given above, pertain to the discursive study of religion, as well, only that now the analysis is directed to the discourse on religion (i.e., to RELIGION), the dispositives that serve as the infrastructure of RELIGION, and possible entanglements with other discourses.<sup>12</sup> RELIGION produces meanings and orders of knowledge that materialize in concrete practices and institutions; these orders interact with non-discursive practices and dispositives such as the organization of higher education or the appearance of new media and technology. Moreover, as a discursive constellation RELIGION is entangled with other

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<sup>11</sup> For the fact that scholars of religion are also agents in the field of RELIGION and that discourse analysis produces discourses on discourses, see von Stuckrad 2010b. As Achim Landwehr notes, this is by no means a disadvantage of discourse analysis “but the consequential application of its research premises” (Landwehr 2009: 98). On the discursive impact on the scholar of religion see also Bruce Lincoln’s tenth thesis: “Understanding the system of ideology that operates in one’s own society is made difficult by two factors: (i) one’s consciousness is itself a product of that system, and (ii) the system’s very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products that one comes to mistake them (and the apparatus through which they are produced and disseminated) for nothing other than ‘nature’ ” (Lincoln 2005 [1996]: 9). It should be noted that Lincoln’s use of ‘discourse’ is broader than Foucault’s; for Lincoln, discourse refers to a wide array of phenomena such as myth, ritual, and classification.

<sup>12</sup> This resonates with Bruce Lincoln’s third thesis on method: “To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine” (Lincoln 2005 [1996]: 8).

discursive constellations, which could be defined as LAW, SCIENCE, SPIRITUALITY, MAGIC, HEALTH, ECONOMY, HEREDITY, or any other discourse that may be of interest for scholarly analysis. Both, dispositives and discursive knots are subject to change, which means that RELIGION is fully historicized and open to intercultural comparison.

### III. Implications: How Do We Study RELIGION?

As noted above, we should not consider the study of discourse itself to be a method. Rather, as a research perspective, or research style, the study of discourse is an interpretative endeavor and thus a hermeneutical strategy to scrutinize the organization of knowledge in a given societal and historical situation (Keller 2005b; Keller 2011: 76-78). Nevertheless, despite the openness to apply various methodological tools and the flexibility to adjust these tools to the research question that is at stake in a concrete project, there are a few basic considerations and implications that come with the decision for a discursive research perspective. We can differentiate three important steps in designing and carrying out a (historical) discourse analysis. I will briefly explain them, using examples from the analysis of RELIGION.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Determining the Research Question*

In principle, all research is intrinsically bound to a discursive construction of meaning and the organization of knowledge. It is therefore a characteristic of discursive perspectives that they can lead to a better understanding of complex dynamics in the generation of approved knowledge—whether the research in question is itself explicitly discursive or not. But even if everything can be studied from a discursive perspective, not all research is itself a *discursive* analysis. Discursive studies have concrete research questions that may differ from research questions as they are typically framed in historical, philological, anthropological, or sociological perspectives.

Historical discourse analysis is interested in the processes of communicational generation, legitimization, and negotiation of meaning systems. When we look at the discursive field of RELIGION, countless research questions are

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<sup>13</sup> Detailed discussions of how to do a concrete discourse analysis in the way that I am advocating it here can be found in Bührmann and Schneider 2008: 75-149; Landwehr 2009: 91-131; Reisigl and Wodak 2010: 93-120; Keller 2011b: 65-117; Keller and Truschkat 2011; Keller and Truschkat 2012. The manuals for concrete research methods in Critical Discourse Analysis that can be found elsewhere are too much focused on linguistic and textual analysis and thus less appropriate for my understanding of historical discourse and dispositive analysis.

possible. In an arbitrary selection, and limiting our focus to RELIGION in Western contexts, we may ask: (a) "What are the structures that regulate the public opinion about Islam in Europe?" (b) "Why is shamanism so attractive to many people in modern Western societies?" (c) "What does juridical regulation of religion tell us about societal knowledge of religion?" (d) "What is the role of religion in the field of natural sciences today?"—To be sure, these are general questions that have to be broken down to more concrete sets of subquestions. But the examples should make clear what kind of questions we typically ask in a discursive analytical framework.

We can translate these questions into discursive language and design a project that reconstructs the discursive entanglements of RELIGION on the one hand, and ISLAM, SHAMANISM, LAW, or SCIENCE on the other. All these discourses lead to further discursive strands that characterize the respective discourse. In the case of SHAMANISM, this may be HEALING, SOUL, NATURE, THERAPY, or CONSCIOUSNESS. It depends on our research focus whether we will need to include all of these discursive strands or only a selection of them.

### *Selecting Data and Building a Corpus*

When we have formulated a research question and possible sets of subquestions that concretize what we are interested in, the next step is the selection of the data that is most suitable for finding an answer to our question. Since discursive approaches are not limited to textual sources, data can be found in all forms of communication that are operative in the attribution of meaning. With regard to the research questions formulated above, possible data sets would include but are not limited to (a) media and newspaper coverage, Internet discussions, political debates; (b) books on shamanism (often popularizing academic theories), workshop programs, Internet forums, interviews with shamanic practitioners; (c) lawsuits, juridical decisions, laws, media coverage, political statements; (d) books on contemporary science, presentation of research results in the media and on the Internet, museum exhibitions.

In addition to concrete sets of data, the research should also include an analysis of dispositives that serve as the 'infrastructure' of the discourse under scrutiny such as new technologies (television, Internet), governmental rules, the healthcare system of a society, funding of scientific research, etc.

Finally, in order to address the genealogy of the discourses under scrutiny, it is important to add an historical dimension to the research outline. For question (a) we may want to look into the genealogy of Orientalist constructions of Islam or the history of European anti-Islamism since the Middle Ages; for (b) we may want to know more about the historical origins of the determining

concepts of nature, the soul, or animism; for (c) it will be important to address lines of continuity and change in juridical treatment of religion since Roman times; and for (d) it is necessary to have an historical awareness of the differences between the contemporary situation and the situation before the emergence of modern science in the nineteenth century.

The lists of possible—or even necessary—sets of data make it clear that a full-blown discursive analysis asks a lot of time and resources. The selection of data and the building of a research corpus will thus be dependent on possible constraints and practicalities. Individual projects can be part of a larger research program, or even consider themselves simply as a contribution to an overall analysis of a discourse. It is methodologically acceptable to design an exemplary study that highlights one aspect of a discourse.<sup>14</sup> What is more, within a larger research program it may be necessary to set up small projects first that make relevant data available for further discursive analysis (such as the critical edition of a text or a social-scientific survey).

### *Choosing Methods and Providing Analyses*

After having put together the research corpus that contains the necessary data for a given project, the next step is to hermeneutically explore the data and proceed with a step-by-step interpretation that will ultimately provide an answer to the research question (typically in a spiral way that reformulates research questions in the light of progressive knowledge of data; this is the classical form of the ‘hermeneutical circle’). At this point, it is important to choose the method that is most suitable for interpreting the research corpus. In the above mentioned examples of research questions, a selection of the following research methods seems to be most appropriate: content analysis, conversation analysis, participant observation, textual interpretation, surveys and interviews, and historical methods.

The generation and interpretation of data is not a goal in itself. It serves the overall question that is formulated within a discursive referential framework. Consequently, the data is used and interpreted with reference to the organiza-

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<sup>14</sup> Exemplary research here means that the study meets all three conditions of an *exemplum*: “First, that the exemplum has been well and fully understood. This requires a mastery of both the relevant primary material and the history and tradition of its interpretation. Second, that the exemplum be displayed in the service of some important theory, some paradigm, some fundamental question, some central element in the academic imagination of religion. Third, that there be some method for explicitly relating the exemplum to the theory, paradigm, or question and some method for evaluating each in terms of the other” (Smith 1982: xi–xii).

tion of knowledge in a given setting, as well as to the attribution of meaning to things and events. It is fully acknowledged that the research results are themselves elements of the discourse under scrutiny; hence, they do not represent the 'truth' about the issue at stake but provide insight into the mechanisms, historical dimensions, and implications of the construction of meaning in a discourse community.

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In conclusion, I hope that the way in which I have framed the discursive study of religion in this article will help scholars of religion to respond adequately to the challenges that the academic study of religion has been facing in the aftermath of the linguistic, pragmatic, cultural, and poststructuralist turns of the twentieth century. Being constructionist in essence and at the same time rigorous in its argumentation, a discourse-historical approach to knowledge about religion is perhaps the most promising interpretative framework for the study of religion today.

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