Vocabulary for the Study of Religion

Volume 1

A–E

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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON
2015

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Action

"Action" is a basic category for the study of religion. As will be argued in this article, the term must be considered as one of the most relevant and fundamental categories in our attempt to understand human behavior, including religious behavior. There has been a long-lasting debate across disciplines—most prominently philosophy, behavioral science, sociology, and psychology—about the proper definition of the concept of action. What is at stake here can easily be shown by a number of simple questions (Wilson 2008): If a woman's arms are moving, does this mean that this woman moved her arms? And if the answer is positive, was this moving of her arms an intentional action or did it simply happen? And if we indeed speak of an intentional action, was the reason for this action conscious to herself or can her intention only be reconstructed from outside?—As these questions make clear, there is a theoretical difference between "action" on the one hand, and "doing something," "happening," and "behavior" on the other. Most theories of action analyze these differences with the use of the concepts "intentionality," "reason," and "agency." Behavior only becomes action when the actor is performing an intentional act, which can be interpreted and understood in a situational framework.

As the philosopher Donald Davidson explains, an action ultimately is "intentional under some description" (1980, essay 3). But even if this is the case, we will need further clarification. A spider that moves its legs to crawl across a table is usually not considered an "agent," even though its behavior is similar to an intentional movement of a person. Thus theories of action will have to conceptualize intentionality in relation to knowledge and consciousness. Harry Frankfurt (1988; 1999), for instance, argues that volition and freedom of action presuppose that we need to have a concept of "acting on a desire with which the agent identifies." But, again, questions remain. Is the conscious identification of an agent really a necessary pre-

condition to call something an action? Particularly in sociological theory, there are attempts at establishing clearly defined structural reasons for intentional (or meaningful) behavior the agent her- or himself does not need to be aware of.

Philosophy and sociology are the main disciplines when it comes to the theorization of human action (on philosophical theories of action see Wilson 2008, with relevant literature; Holmström-Hintika and Tuomela 1997 provide an overview of sociological theories of action; see also Haferkamp 1976). When it comes to religious action, we can note that those forms of action that are deemed religious by scholars or the actors themselves do not represent a fundamentally different category than non-religious action. Instead of developing a theory for religious action, we simply use theories of action for an analysis of religious behavior.

Classic Theories of (Religious) Action

Max Weber

Every overview of classic theories of action has to start with Max Weber (on the usefulness of Weber's theory of action for subsequent philosophical discussion, particularly in Donald Davidson, see Turner 1983; see also Schluchter 2005). Weber argued against approaches to religion that were common at the beginning of the twentieth century and that conceptualized religion as an inner experience, searching for the "essence" of religion (German *Wesen der Religion*); Weber, however, insisted on the fact that the object of sociological inquiry can never be a person's internal processes. Already in 1913 he claimed that the object of *verstehende Soziologie* ("understanding sociology") is "not every kind of 'inner disposition' or 'outward habit' but: *action*" (Weber 1968: 429, italics original; all translations of German quotations are mine). In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* ("Economy and Society"), Weber notes that sociology of religion is not dealing with

the "essence" of religion but with the conditions and the impact of a certain kind of communal action [*Gemeinschaftshandeln*], the understanding of which […] can only be gained when we start with the subjective experiences, ideas, and intentions of the individual—with the "meaning" ['*Sinn*']—because the outward order of things is extremely variable. (Weber 1976: 245)

Hence, the "meaning" of religious action should not be confused with the "essence" of religion. Meaning is generated when a person attributes it to any form of social action. By identifying this meaning, sociologists of religion are able to interpret and understand religious action. Consistently, Weber defines action (*Handeln*) as "an understandable response to 'objects,' which is specified by some (*subjective*) *meaning* that a person 'has' or 'intends,' even if this meaning is more or less unnoticed" (Weber 1968: 429, italics original). This definition allows Weber to subsume even Buddhist contemplation or Christian asceticism under the rubric of "action," because in both cases the actor refers to the subjective meaning of inner "objects" (see *ibid.*; Weber 1976: 11). Every form of action or habit (*Verhalten*), be it internal or external, be it active or passive, is subsumed under the sociological category of action. Again, this is true even if a person fails to do something at all, because the actor still demonstrates an "inner response" (*inneres Sichverhalten*). Religious action then is simply a subcategory of action, and applied to the case that the subjective meaning of an action is based on religious motives and ideas.

For Weber, the category of "action" is intrinsic to his very concept of religion. That is why he also includes non-institutionalized forms of religion in his interpretive model and sometimes speaks of "religiosity" instead of "religion." This is in accordance with Weber's conceptualization of sociology as an "empiric science of action," contrasting the "dogmatic sciences" such as logic, esthetics, or ethics (see Weber 1976: 1–2). Sociological interpretation reconstructs the "subjectively intended meaning" of an action; it is not interested in establishing the "objectively 'correct' or a metaphysically established 'true' meaning" (Weber 1976: 1). Religion from this perspective is only interesting as long as it influences social action, i.e. in its capacity to form a certain response to and positioning vis-à-vis the world. This positioning and response to the world (*Sichverhalten zu 'Objekten'*) is what Weber conceptualizes as "religiosity."

Talcott Parsons

Critically engaging the theories of Weber and others, Talcott Parsons is one of the most influential thinkers of religious action in the twentieth century. He developed a complex theory of action, which he combined with a systems theory and then integrated in a general sociological theory. Parsons' work, which is usually divided into several phases with a high level of theoretical reflection, cannot be discussed here in detail (see Brandt 1993; on the reception of Parsons' theories see Fox et al. 2005; Staubmann 2006; on Parsons's response to Weber see Brandt 1993: 317–352; Schwinn 1995; Tribe 2007). It must suffice to give a brief description of his major model of a general theory of action, which Parsons introduced between 1935 and 1939 in his studies *The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory*, "The Structure of Social Action," and "Actor, Situation, and Normative Pattern." (See also the overview in Parsons and Shils 1962: 3–29.)

To understand Parsons' theory of action, it is important to know that he was critical of two methodological tendencies in the social sciences of his time. First, he argued against reductionism, i.e. the attempt to reduce social phenomena to empirically testable categories. Against a simple causal interpretation, adopted from the natural sciences, Parsons claims that there are forms of behavior that are not subject to simple, empirically demonstrable causalities; he mentions religious action, but also actions of art or emotional affection, all of which belong to a category of behavior that transgresses causal patterns of the natural sciences. Second, Parsons also critiques the tendency

to explain action entirely as a self-referential manifestation of ideas and values, or as a Hegelian "self-realization of the spirit."

In his early work Parsons tried to establish a theory of action that could accomplish three things: (1) demonstrate the causal patterns of action, as long as they are empirically verifiable; (2) provide interpretational schemes for forms of action that transgress causal contexts; and (3) integrate both parts into a single theory of action without giving preference to one of them. On a most basic level, Parson notes: "For the purposes of the theory of action the smallest conceivable concrete unit is the unit act" (1937: 48). These unit acts cannot be divided into smaller units, but sociologists can analyze them in their complex structure. Parsons differentiates several "concrete elements" that form the referential pattern of his theory of action (1937: 44): (1) Every unit act presupposes the existence of an *actor*. (2) Every unit act refers to a future state that is different from the initial state of the act; it therefore has an *end*. (3) The unit act is taking place within an identifiable *situation*. The situation can further be analytically divided into several components; those that the actor can manipulate, control, and instrumentalize, and those that the actor cannot change. The former Parsons calls the *means* of the unit act; the latter are its *conditions*. (4) The unit act is built into a structure that consists of both arbitrary and non-arbitrary elements. For instance, the actor can choose means among certain alternatives, but this choice is also dependent on normative orientations that are intrinsically forced upon the actor by the situational context of the unit act.

Already in his early versions of this model Parsons introduced several sub-schemes and categories. In his subsequent work he elaborated this theory further and developed what has become known as Parsons's "structural functionalism" and his "theory of functionalist systems." Other theorists later picked up these ideas, among them Clifford Geertz, Anthony Giddens, Robert N. Bellah (see Bellah's response to Parsons in his chapter "God, Nation, and Self in America: Some Tensions Between Parsons and Bellah," in Fox et al. 2005: 137–147), and Niklas Luhmann. When it comes to theories of action, Luhmann is perhaps the most relevant thinker in this list.

Niklas Luhmann

Niklas Luhmann, who had a strong impact on sociological theory (see Luhmann 1977 and 2000; on his later theory of religion see Laermans and Verschraegen 2001), critically engaged Parsons' social theory. Like Jürgen Habermas and others, Luhmann tried to bridge the gap between action theory and social systems theory. While for Parsons the unit of the system's operation was action, Luhmann construed his social systems theory analogously to Parsons' structural functionalism. This means that the analysis of social structure should not be based on (the aggregate of) action, but on the interactions among actions. Put differently, whereas Parsons (and Giddens after him) had attributed actions to actors and to aggregates of actors performing via institutions, Luhmann's theory refers to "symbolic interactionism": Luhmann defines human action in terms of its interactive meaning at the network level (see Leydesdorff 2000). Consequently, Luhmann developed a theory of communication that is even broader than action. With regard to religion he notes:

> We can [...], in the context of a sociological theory, think of religion exclusively as a communicative happening [*kommunikatives Geschehen*][...]. In contrast to statements religions make about themselves, we therefore are not dealing with religious entities (godheads, for instance) that are described as existing. The only thing that interests us is the fact that this is said. (Because if it would not have been said, there would be no reason to mull over the question whether it is true or not.) [...] Hence, religious *belief* always is *confession*. But the happening's *unity* is generated as communication and not as (unavoidably precarious) state of mind of

the people involved. (Luhmann 2000: 40–42, italics in original)

Action as an (Unacknowledged) Element in Recent Theoretical Debates

The classic theories of action as they were developed in philosophy and sociology offer a theoretical basis to many theoretical approaches that have been discussed in the study of religion recently. Often, however, the usefulness of those theories is underrated or even overlooked. Two examples may illustrate this.

The leading theories of action, discussed above, are a direct influence on what is today known as rational choice theory (or, rather, theories) of religion. These theories argue that human action necessitates a decision between alternatives and that this decision is made in a rational way. This reduction of actors' decisions and actions to rational choices allow sociologists to interpret and analyze religious action in a meaningful way. But rational choice theories of religion have also encountered strong criticism (see discussion in Young 1997; Bruce 1999; cf. Wallis and Bruce 1986). Critics argue that the theory is not open to falsification because it assumes that the benefits of an action (and thus the "rational" reasons) can be unknown to or even unintended by the actors; it is therefore the observing scholar who makes up the "rational" reasons for specific actions. To counter this critique, more elaborate versions of rational choice theory, referring directly to the theories of Weber, Parsons, and others, establish a referential framework of individual action that aims at an objective interpretation of social action. Hartmut Esser's concept of "situational logic" (*Situationslogik*) is such an elaborated theory (Esser 1999, particularly 387–403). Following Karl R. Popper's theoretical considerations, Esser explains that this model is not interested in the individual's inner experience or opinion but in the situational context that provides an objective framework for (rational) behavior. The object of study is action that gains its meaning in accordance with the situation (*situationsgerechtes Handeln*). This is very similar to Weber's terminology, as well as to Parsons' notions of the "means" and "conditions" of a situation in which a unit act takes place. But Esser moves the analytical focus even more into the direction of situational contexts and away from the "act" itself.

Another recent application of classic theories of action is the field of performance and ritual studies. James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey note: "Not much about ritual is incontrovertible, but that rituals are composed of actions is surely not open to doubt. To view ritual as action might therefore seem to be an obvious and a reasonably promising starting point for analysis, but it has been a comparatively rare one" (Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006: 265). This is certainly true, but even Laidlaw and Humphrey refer only to anthropological approaches that theorize action and performance (Emil Durkheim, Victor Turner, etc.), as well as to cognitive theories that have dominated recent discussions (such as the contributions of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley). We have to conclude that the added value of sociological and philosophical models of action to the understanding of rituals still has to be explored.

Acknowledgement

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Adaptation

Adaptation in evolutionary biology refers to a *trait* of an organism or the *process* by which an organism evolved a particular trait.

Famous examples of adaptation as a trait include the beaks of birds, the camouflage patterns of insects, and the shapes of fins of aquatic vertebrates such as seals and porpoises. Evolutionary biologists have described adaptations in virtually every kind of organism. Textbooks describe many examples (see Futuyma 2013). What they share is a claim that the trait is a certain way—it has a particular size, shape, width, or pattern—because that way benefits the organism. This notion of adaptation as a beneficial trait dates back at least as far as Aristotle who correctly understood that form can be understood by reference to function (see Leigh 2001; Egerton 1975). To this extent, there is a purpose that a particular trait serves, and Aristotle believed that observed traits were optimal or best at performing their purpose. Aristotle did not propose a mechanism by which traits came to be so well adapted.

The modern understanding of adaptation as a trait depends strongly on the notion of adaptation as a process driven by natural selection, as famously enunciated by Alfred Russel Wallace (1858) and Charles Darwin (1859). Imagine that a population contains individuals that differ in,