Two Problems with Constructionism in the Study of Religion[1]

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of "constructionism" in the academic study of religion. It argues that the use of this theoretical perspective have had little value for three reasons. (1) Misinterpreted as necessarily relativistic, it has served as a superficial foil for theological and phenomenological realisms. (2) Instead of specifying what is constructed from what and how, the theory has been taken for granted rather than clarified. As a result, the language of "construction" adds little, given that most work in the field already places religious phenomena in their contingent social context.

Resumo

Este ensaio examina o papel do "construcionismo" nas ciências da religião. Ele argumenta que o esta perspectiva teórica teve pouco valor por três razões: (1) Interpretada erradamente como necessariamente relativística, ela serve como contraste superficial dos realismos teológico e fenomenológico. (2) Em vez de especificar o que é construído de que e como, a teoria é dada por certa e não clarificada. Como resultado, a linguagem da "construção" acrescenta pouco, dado que a maior parte dos trabalhos no campo já colocam fenômenos religiosos nos seus contextos sociais contingentes.

Judging by their titles, a large number of Religious Studies publications appear to analyze the "social construction" of some religious phenomenon. For the most part, however, this language of "construction" has been of little use in the academic study of religion: it is unjustified and redundant. This paper develops these two claims.

Constructionism and Relativism

Appeals to "constructionism" in the academic study of religion are misleading.[2] Scholars of religion have generally misunderstood constructionism as being necessarily relativistic. As a result, it has come to play a rhetorical role in opposition to the discipline's two realisms. According to this distorted perspective, theological views hold that talk of "religion" corresponds to one true Revelation; phenomenological views hold that talk of "religion" corresponds to a cross-cultural sacred; and constructionist views recognize that discursive and social relations mediate talk of "religion".

However, this is a false dichotomy (or trichotomy). It is possible to be both a realist and a constructionist. More specifically, in the study of religion, it is possible to be a theological realist, a phenomenological realist, and a constructionist. After all, Christian theologians also discuss the construction of religious phenomena (e.g., Leming, 1989; Segovia, 1995; Yates, 1998).

Constructionist views are not necessarily anti-realist. Atheists, agnostics and religious practitioners can hold equally that scriptural interpretations, ritual gestures, sacred architecture, and symbols are all, to some extent, culturally and historically contingent. They are constructed differently according to context. Understanding why certain groups of people pray in certain languages, use variant wordings or make distinctive gestures will generally involve investigating historical, cultural, and social factors. This is true whether one affirms, denies, or suspends judgment regarding claims that God exists or that a certain scripture is His Revealed Word. The use of the term 'construction' just highlights the need to clarify the discursive and social processes that lead to variation in religious meaning, *whether or not one asserts a realist core to the religious phenomena under study*. Even fundamentalists must admit that aspects of their beliefs, practices, and institutions vary in time and place, even if they define these as secondary to some allegedly unchanging core.

Social constructionist approaches limit themselves to studying the ways the meaning of religion is elaborated and used. And the choice to study these factors makes the study of religion extremely relevant to any study of local and global events in the world today:

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2   The best discussion of social constructionism, doing justice to both sociological theory and the academic study of religion, is J.A. BECKFORD, Social Theory and Religion.

> [T]he social construction of the meaning of religion … is a continuous process of negotiation, reproduction and challenge. The meanings attributed to religion are, in part, a product of social interaction and negotiation at the level of individuals, groups, organizations and whole societies…. [A] social constructionist approach tries to discover how terms such as 'religion', 'religious', 'sacred' and 'spiritual' and used; how the usage varies across different categories of people, time and space; how it reflects collective interests; how human actors justify their usage of these terms; how social groups and organizations institutionalize the usage; and how social agencies try to regulate the activities to which the terms are applied.[3]

A related problem is the recent tendency to dismiss the concept of "religion" because it is argued to be a modern, western construct.[4] This argument is week for several reasons.[5] Noting the contingency of the concept of "religion" and of other concepts used by scholars of religion (e.g., "sacred", "sacrifice", "ritual") does not undermine their usefulness; it draws our attention to the work of specifying *how* to use them more effectively. Noting that such concepts are not present in or do not apply easily to all cultures is also not a major problem. Only one who misunderstands the use of theoretical terms would reject them for being limited. Only a naïve realist—one who imagines that each word in a given language (i.e., "full moon" or "religion") corresponds without ambiguity to one real, unitary, determinate object in the world—would react in such an extreme fashion to the obvious fact that our conceptual tools are imperfect and idealized constructs that we use to pick out, to describe, to interpret, and to explain the phenomena that we study. One of the main values of a properly elaborated constructionist theory is that is specifies more clearly just how specific concepts and categories come to be constructed in specific contexts. The unsurprising "discovery" that "religion" is a construct simply invites us to clarify how it is constructed and to continue to participate, reflexively and self-consciously, in its ongoing construction.

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3   J.A. BECKFORD, *Social Theory and Religion*, pp. 197, 193.

4   See, e.g., E.J. SHARPE *Understanding Religion*, p. 46; R.T. MCCUTCHEON, *Manufacturing Religion*; D. DUBUISSON, *L'Occident et la religion*; T. FITZGERALD, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, pp. 6, 197).

5   See G. BENAVIDES, What raw materials are used in the manufacture of religion? In: *Culture and Religion*, pp. 113-22; G. BENAVIDES, Religious studies between science and ideology. In: *Religious Studies Review*, pp. 105-108; T.A. TWEED, *Crossing and Dwelling*, pp. 36-42.

The Paucity of Theory

Constructionist talk is common in Religious Studies; constructionist work is not. Constructionism is a specific theoretical approach, largely within sociology, with clear methodological implications: it clarifies (i) *what* is constructed (ii) *from what* and (iii) *how*.[6] It is not a general recognition that things depend on context. The presence of the word "construction" does not itself imply the presence of, much less support for, a constructionist theory.

Most commonly, the word "construction" is used trivially, evoking various common-sense dimensions of contingency. For example, the word "constructions" is used to refer to western *portrayals* of Asian religions (Urban 1999; Pennington 2001), to sectarian *interpretations* of a particular concept (Clarke 2001), to specific individuals' *conceptions* of religion (Despland, 1999), to the *institutionalization* of aspects of social relations (White and White 1996), to mutual *influences* between aspects of religious phenomena (Bell 1992; 1997),[7] or to statistical *correlations* between the frequency of a particular religious experience and such characteristics as race and gender (MacDonald 1992). In such cases, there is no need to use the word "construction". It would be clearer to use one of these apparent synonyms. These uses have two things in common: they invoke nothing beyond the general sense of contingency that is implicit in any given perspective; and they offer little or no account of a process of construction.[8]

This tendency to refer to "construction(s)" any time that any aspect of contingency is involved waters down the concept. It obscures the fact that constructionism is valuable if the theory is made explicit, if, that is, we clarify what is constructed from what and how. We can call the first of these "weak constructionism" and the latter "strong constructionism". The former is common in Religious Studies but of little value; the latter is rare, yet valuable.

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6 Given this general emphasis on contextualization, the "social" in "social constructionism" is generally redundant (see B. LATOUR and S. WOOLGAR *Laboratory Life*, p. 281; I. HACKING, On being more literal about construction. In: *The Politics of Constructionism*, pp. 49-52).

7 For example, Bell holds that socially situated processes construct tradition, values, categories, discourse, and meaning, hence theories, all of which construct ritual; ritual in turn constructs cultural images, dispositions, and situations as well as community, identity, ethnicity, gender, and power, hence reality and worlds (C. BELL, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, pp. 75, 83, 86, 101, 144, 167, 225, 251-52, 263-66).

8 A useful example of a properly constructionist approach in the study of religion is A. BLASI, *Making Charisma*. Blasi goes so far as to argue that only sociologists are capable of dealing "scientifically" with religion (The trouble with religious studies, In: *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, pp. 251-258.)

As a result of the above points, constructionism is often redundant in the study of religion. Because appropriate theory is largely absent, the assertion that some religious phenomenon is "constructed" tends to mean little more than that it is somehow contingent. But, if this is what construction is about, then the study of religion is inherently constructionist. The contextualisation of the sacred is a definitive characteristic of the field. Few scholars of religion would deny that religious phenomena exhibit some degree of historical and cultural contingency. (Strong constructionism simply highlights the value of exploring methodically the processes through which these contingencies emerge.)

Constructionism, in the study of religion, tends to denote a general allegiance to theoretical assumptions that are shared by most, if not all, scholars in the field. On the one hand, as noted above, works that discus social, historical, or cultural variations (yet that do not address the mechanisms of this variation) claim the constructionist label. On the other hand, many other works, that do not refer to "construction" at all, share these same characteristics. 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 weakly constructionist. Dumont's dualist structuralist stance explores the discursive and social constitution of hierarchy in a comparative context (1970; cf. 1976). Marriott denies the dualism, but explores the contingent constitution of purity through social and discursive processes (1976; 1990).

There is little point in talking 'constructs' without a theory of construction. Almost all work in the academic study of religion involves weak constructionism, explicitly or not. As a result, there is little point in referring to "constructs" or in publishing articles on "the social construction of X" unless one is doing strong constructionism.

Strong 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. More studies of this sort would be of great value for the study of religion. In sum, we could do with more constructionist work and less constructionist talk.

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