The Complex Discursivity of Religion

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I am profoundly honored by the editors' invitation to comment on this impressive volume. Now, confronted with the task of composing my remarks, I must admit to feeling somewhat uncomfortable and even out of my depth, because the ideas presented here are stunningly convincing. Since the mid-1990s I have worked mostly on general issues in social science discourse research, with a strong focus on the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) and environmental discourses;[1] I am not a specialist in religious discourse or religious studies (or sociology of religion, which is closely related). This means that I am not in a position to discuss the historical and globe-spanning details of the rich empirical contributions presented in this compendium to the extent I would like, at least not in regard to the existing body of work on religion. However, it is plain to me that they show—quite convincingly—the usefulness of discursive approaches as a particular perspective on social (religious) phenomena. Also, by reflecting on central problems—such as the question of what exactly is labeled 'religion' by whom in different parts of the world—they not only acknowledge the complexity of language use and discursive practices in the fields they observe and analyze, but also make visible the reflexivity of discourse research itself, which is a core component of 'doing discourse research'. The core question—e.g., that addressed by Adrian Hermann in Chapter 5, Teemu Taira in Chapter 6, Kocku von Stuckrad in Chapter 9, Mitsutoshi Horii in Chapter 12, and Helge Årsheim in Chapter 13—of how the research area and concrete subject we are interested in (religion, politics, sports, sciences, economy, arts, war, gender, postcolonialism, etc.) makes use (or not) of the concepts discourse researchers are applying is fundamental. Does it make sense to them? Do they use it? What is *their* understanding of the phenomena we are looking for? No study can avoid reflecting on this. And there is no simple answer—but there are good reasons for using a concept foreign to the field itself (an old Foucauldian trick) or doing just the opposite: not being trapped by one's own pre-judgments.

As a discourse researcher myself, I find it fascinating that the present authors, by virtue of concerning themselves with different research interests

1 See Keller 2013; 2011a; 2011b.

and phenomena, have so seamlessly become part of social science discourse research as an interdisciplinary field of debate on procedures and findings, using (and sometimes making significant contributions to) the very same theoretical lenses that are being used in other disciplines. In sharing these perspectives—such as CDA, new materialism/agential realism, practice theory, or SKAD, among many others—it seems that entrenched divides between different academic fields of interest have once again become traversable. I would therefore invite and even urge, if I may, the authors to participate in the more general debate on discourse research taking place today, giving their account of and going beyond the realm of studies in religion, in journals such as the *Journal for Discourse Research/Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung, Discourse & Society*, and others. I believe there is a real interest here in their take on general issues as well as their empirical analyses. This holds true especially for the more theoretical reflections presented in this book, which I would like to comment on in the following paragraphs. It is my hope that my contribution will not come across as a kind of sweeping, 'ex-post' critique (certainly this is not the intention), but instead as an invitation to further discussion and debate surrounding several points that concern the whole, heterogeneous arena of discourse research across a growing number of academic disciplines.

I will begin by offering some general remarks that attempt to underscore just how thoroughly religious studies, sociology, and discourse research are intertwined—possibly without fully realizing it. Religion has definitely played a major historical role in the emergence of sociology. Auguste Comte, who invented the name of this new science in the first half of the nineteenth century, conceived of sociology as a master science and a 'positive philosophy', intended to guide social 'order and progress' and to overcome the discord caused by the religious wars of his time (see Bourdeau 2014). Such a science should be, according to Comte, a religion in itself—indeed, a 'master religion' to replace all 'lesser' religions—based on empirical knowledge. He even created a church of positive philosophy (of order and progress), the Religion of Humanity, which still has believers and temples in Brazil (where the national flag bears his motto) and in France. While Marx and Engels considered religion to be 'opium of the people' (their preferred narcotic to escape from reality, subjugation, and a miserable life), Emile Durkheim, another founding father of sociology, presented a rather different approach to religion a few decades later. In his sociology of knowledge approach to the 'elementary forms of religious life' (Durkheim 2008), he developed a comprehensive sociological and historical analysis of how 'systems of representations' (*systèmes de représentations*) unfold. In contrast to Immanuel Kant, he conceived of all kinds of categories and classifications (including 'holy', 'profane', 'space', 'time', and 'causality' or

'cause–effect') as being social constructions; in his understanding, there was no such thing as transcendental consciousness. He then focused on the relationship between the social structures (group structures) of religious communities, including non-Western tribes, and how they ordered and classified their world through systems of symbols or through a coherent cosmology. According to Durkheim, this logic of classification directly corresponds to the logic of social structure. To give a simplified example: A tribe with five distinguished clans is likely to 'know' not four cardinal directions, but five—one for each clan.

It is well known that Max Weber (2001) was also interested in questions of religion. However, there is one important difference between his views and Durkheim's. Whereas Durkheim was interested in explaining how such classifications emerge as an effect of social structures, Weber pointedly asked: What are the consequences of religious worldviews and technologies of the self within the world they populate? What are, at least at a particular moment in European history, their effects on the dynamics of modern capitalism? His answers are well known (and disputed).

It might seem strange to mention classic authors of sociology here, whose research appears sorely outdated at first glance. However, there are reasons for doing exactly that. As I suggested several years ago (e.g., Keller 2011b: 44), Weber's work on the Protestant ethic may well be the very first example of discourse research in social science (and on religious discourses, no less!). Weber analyzes a selection of documents from religious discourse (sermons, religious guides, self-help or self-improvement literature), focusing especially on the forms of life conduct or technologies of the self these documents described, and combines this with an interpretation of their far-reaching social consequences (as well as with observations based on tax statistics). It is therefore understandable that discourse research found common points of departure here, namely in the form of Foucault, who positioned his own work on technologies of the self within the line of thinking established by Weber.

But why Durkheim? First, the reflections he introduced regarding the relationship between (religious/cosmological) systems of classification and (tribal) social structures have been immensely successful. They are the direct precursors of the work of the famous anthropologist Mary Douglas (who, not by chance, first labeled the social structure behind environmental activism as a 'sect') as well as, in a somewhat modified version, of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological analysis of strong ties between classes and classifications. Second, and less obvious, is the link between Durkheim and Michel Foucault. Interestingly, the latter is known to have proposed, as a title for his Collège de France chair, the denomination 'history of systems of thought' (*histoire des systèmes de pensée*, Foucault 1981)—thereby using a concept very close to the 'systems of

representations' that had been established by Durkheim in his "Elementary Forms of Religious Life"![2] Certainly, Foucault is much closer to Friedrich Nietzsche and his claim for a historical, empirical, and knowledge-oriented philosophy. He rarely refers to Durkheim, and not at all with regard to the concept of 'systems of representations' or the problem of classifications, which is at the very heart of *The Order of Things* as well as of "Elementary Forms." There could be many reasons for this. It could be due to Durkheim's emphasis on moral ties and solidarity; it could also be due to the rigorous overhaul and realignment Foucault brings to the analysis of systems of thought and classification, or to the fact that, at the end of the 1960s, 'social' or 'collective representation' had become a common concept in French social psychology. In contrast to Durkheim (and, in a different way, Marx), who emphasizes the correspondence between classification or worldview and social structure, Foucault conceives of systems of thought and classifications as effects of a complex historical constellation and formation, of what he called 'causal de-multiplication' and 'discursive formations'. Such constellations can be 'retrieved' via genealogical analysis and, close to Weber's understanding, examined with an eye towards their consequences or effects. Foucault is more Weberian than Durkheimian. Durkheim, to an extent, represents what Paul Ricœur (1977) and, following him, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1983) called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Such hermeneutics, represented in different ways by Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, attempt to seek out deep-rooted, underlying causal mechanisms that produce the surface of given phenomena. But Foucault, for quite a long time, wanted his project to be about an analytics of just the positively given surfaces (of discourse), declining to search for these monocausal mechanics. Maybe we could describe this approach, with reference to Weber, as what I have called a *hermeneutics of constellations*, which is interested in complexity, assemblages, and effects (Keller 2015). This seems to me the turn Foucault introduced into the analysis of systems of thought, via the archaeology and genealogy of discursive and dispositive formations.

The field of discourse research provides room for both kinds of hermeneutics. In my view, it is not principally about confronting these traditions or arguing for one against the other (as has surely happened for decades now). Starting from an interest in discourse, they merely follow different rationales and ask different questions, the answers to which might complement, ignore, or contradict each other. But all of this is input for discussion, and it does not exclude asking questions about theoretical and methodological grounding or about corresponding methods of analysis—and certainly about outcomes and findings.

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2 Both concepts have been translated into German as „Denksysteme."

Given the contributions to the present volume, and in addition to the extraordinary richness of the empirical work presented here, there are some major strands of argument in line with more general and interdisciplinary debates on discourse which are discussed: Critical discourse analytic approaches are looking for the social origin and function of religion in reproducing (and maybe questioning?) power and domination. More knowledge-oriented analytical approaches explore the conflicts and broader effects of discursive construction of religious phenomena. Finally, the need for reflection on the reflexivity of discourse research as well as on the limits of discourse analysis and its possible transformation through new materialisms is argued.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Bourdieusian *Habitusformationsanalyse*, as presented in this volume, are part of the hermeneutics of suspicion tradition. What then is their general logic of research and explanation? A Bourdieusian analysis (see Chapters 7 and 8) explains a particular religious worldview or discourse adherence via the habitus of a social group or individual, combined with the power- or dominance-related functions such worldviews serve in a given field. It pinpoints how symbolic ordering is the product and servant of a particular position in society. Critical Discourse Analysis (see Chapter 1) nowadays—beginning with the writings of Norman Fairclough in the 1990s (or in Germany somewhat differently, with Siegfried Jäger and the DISS–team)—presents a complex, interdisciplinary theoretical framework, based in linguistics but enlarged by important contemporary sociological work. In the present volume (Chapter 1), Titus Hjelm convincingly insists that it (like other perspectives in discourse research) is not simply a method, but a methodology (or a theory–methods package, as I would put it). As a general theory of discourse, CDA shares arguments with other approaches to discourse (e.g., SKAD) but conceives of itself much more as a political intervention than as a genealogical and interpretative analytics. Despite the broad theoretical arguments established, in its empirical work, the focus of CDA appears to be narrow. Maybe this is why Hjelm writes about "how it could be used, rather than how it has been used" (see page 16). It could be interesting to compare this statement to the empirical work presented by Frans Wijsen in Chapter 10, which is situated in CDA (amongst other references). But are concepts such as 'intertextuality' indeed specific to CDA? This might be due to my professional deformation, but to me it seems that a classical sociological (or cultural studies) case analysis of identity work via interviews would end up with the very same results. So what is the particular contribution of CDA here? More generally speaking, CDA is about unmasking the ideological function of language use by pointing to hidden capitalist and neoliberal interests—or general interests in domination—below the surface of discourse. Chapter 11, by Marcus Moberg, presents a solid

statement on this, identifying 'marketization' as the suspect cause of discursive change.[3] Alternatively, CDA discovers and points to the discriminatory effects of racist, right-wing, anti-Semitic, conservative, sexist speech in whatever situation or manifestation of discourse. It implies an explicit emancipatory and 'critical' political commitment on the part of the analyst, which, via analysis, might contribute to social sensibilities for language use, e.g., in mass media reporting or office talk. This in itself, by the way, is no guarantee of emancipatory or critical effects in society—and CDA has no exclusive copyright on the complex dynamics of critical work. Just consider the broad usage of Foucauldian work, following a rather different rationale of critique.

SKAD, as referred to by Kocku von Stuckrad in Chapter 9, is not a method, but rather a research program and theory–methods package. It seeks to understand the discursive construction of reality—that is, complex social constellations of power/knowledge production (or construction), knowledge circulation and transformation via politics of knowledge, the multiple foundations and arenas that surround these processes, and (by using the concepts of *dispositif* or subjectification) the effects of discursive constructions.[4] This is a very different idea of why and how to do discourse research, situated in the Foucauldian 'genealogy' project and its version of critique: analyzing the 'becoming' of our taken-for-granted realities and the ways in which these realities are opened up or transformed in societies (including the effects of social sciences' storytelling about such realities).

I strongly disagree with the critique that SKAD argues "for the correspondence between realism and constructionism" and promotes "representationalist assumptions", as George Ioannides suggests in Chapter 3 (see page 59). This seems to be a deep misunderstanding, perhaps due to the confusion around social constructivism and social constructionism in English-speaking academia, which is already present in Karen Barad's work. But Barad rather talks about "sociology of scientific knowledge" and acknowledges herself to be an "admitted social constructivist" (Barad 1996: 164), stating that "[t]the observer does not have total agency over passive matter—not any representation of reality will do—since not any result one can think of is possible: the world 'kicks back'" (Barad 1996: 188). I referred to this old pragmatist idea when arguing that the world appears as 'resistance' to meaning-making and

3 Once again, I would like to ask what makes this analysis a CDA work. Is it the assumption that it is the economy behind the surface of discourse? Some 35 years ago, Jürgen Habermas, in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, made a more fundamental point on the "colonisation of the life world" by economy as one of the potential damaging deformations of modern societies.

4 See the bibliography at the end of this chapter.

interpretation. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's sociology of knowledge allows us to account for the existence of multiple, even contradicting "realities" (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Situated in the pragmatist tradition and in Max Weber's epistemology, the idea of discursive construction conceives of discourse as a hypothesis for inquiry into particular realms of the social, which shows its usefulness or lack thereof along a specific research trajectory. This includes the Foucauldian insistence on 'discourses as practices' as well as his notion of the dispositive—an assemblage of doings, sayings, actors, materialities, etc. Indeed, SKAD argues for a more complex integration of the elements of dispositives into discourse research. In connection with the social constructionist work of Berger and Luckmann, stating that a symbolic order *must deal with* the 'resistances of the world' is not equivalent to saying that it is supposed to *represent* reality 'as it is'. SKAD is close to material semiotics, as presented by John Law (2008). Karen Barad argues for a new relational ontology of becoming, which again claims to discover the true reality of reality. This could be a subject for discourse analytical research rather than the solid basis for new perspectives in theorizing discourse.

Nevertheless, I agree with Ioannides and Jay Johnston (Chapter 4) that materialities are all too often neglected parts (or 'silenced others') in discourse research, despite Foucault's concept of the dispositive and his empirical work in *Discipline and Punish*, and researchers should make more of an effort to account for this. However, I wonder whether the new materialist turn or new agential realism, as presented in Chapters 3 and 4, imply a deep need for fundamental change in discourse research. The research interests linked to such claims in the present volume—e.g., researching the role of intuition, 'energy', elements of nature, and/or ritual practices—merely seem to belong to other domains of study. Researchers might be interested in these issues and care about the role of things accordingly. But is there a need to extend discourse research to such aims? Does this imply a new epistemology for discourse research itself? What would it look like then? Couldn't we simply agree that there might be other perspectives outside discourse research that address those questions? This certainly could and certainly will be an important point for further consideration, as long as the material turn is not surpassed by a new *spiritual* turn (see the reference to 'intuition' in Chapter 4, or Knudson 2015), which logically should be the next 'turn' ahead—the latest in a winding series of turns. There is a lot of "twist and shout going around," as the American sociologist Adele Clarke put it.[5]

5 Adele Clarke, "A History of Qualitative Inquiry in the U.S. Post WWII, with Special Focus on Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis." Lecture at Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, 25 June 2015.

Highly different versions of such a 'spiritual turn' might be an object for further research in discourse studies of religion. A first strand could be called the participatory and politics of acknowledgement version, e.g., arguments in favor of indigenous epistemologies or participation of religious worldviews in scientific governance, etc. An opposite version is currently present in the massive return of violence claimed by religious fundamentalism. This is certainly debated in the public sphere as well as in religious and social studies. But discourse research has not turned toward these phenomena and events, which pose a series of important questions: Is there a stealthy but forceful, perhaps even horrific return of violence legitimated by religious belief as a structuring principle of discursive formations? What would a discourse analysis perspective on discourses that exist in religiously contextualized spaces—and by this I mean not discourses about religion, but discourses in contexts deeply shaped by religion—look like? What shape must researchers' engagement with these questions take when analyzing the discursive and practical violence that certain terrorist acts are introducing into the public realm in the name of a god? How can we conceive of a discourse analysis that must assume as a valid, extant standpoint positions that consider the life and death of critics of religion as openly negotiable?

I hope readers will pardon me for the more general tone of these concluding remarks, but a deeper engagement with selected arguments is beyond the purpose of this final chapter. This also holds true for the fascinating, rich empirical analyses and reflections on the reflexivity of discourse research in this volume (as mentioned in the beginning) and for dealing with the problem of using a concept (such as religion/non-religion) for phenomena which, from their own perspective, might ignore or even oppose such a category. Such an undertaking is central to discourse theory and empirical analysis and is in no way exhausted by the present book and related work. There are further debates to come.

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