Debatte

Hubert Seiwert, „Theory of Religion and Historical Research“

Hubert Seiwert’s article, “Theory of Religion and Historical Research: A Critical Realist Perspective on the Study of Religion as an Empirical Discipline” (Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft 28.2 [2020]: 207–236), evoked various reactions, both affirmative and critical. The following responses address some important aspects of that engagement with the article, and Seiwert discusses these points in the concluding response to his critics.

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Allies in the Fullness of Theory

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Hubert Seiwert’s article ends up with a position that resembles our own,1 though we get to our views by different paths. We concentrate here on Seiwert’s attempt to use our position as an example of “empty theory” and on his recommendations for reformulating it. We are honoured by Seiwert’s attention to our views, and we welcome the opportunity to further discuss these sorts of important but neglected issues of theory and meta-theory in our discipline. We will argue three things. (i) His view of our position rests on a misunderstanding (specifically, regarding our meta-theory). (ii) When understood in the manner that we intend, our perspective yields the sort of things that Seiwert wants non-empty theories of religion to be. Moreover, (iii), we do so in a manner that does not postulate what we consider to be problematic and contentious ontological items. In sum, we respectfully suggest that our work is an example of what Seiwert recommends, not of what he critiques. Our views of theory are more allied than opposed.

1 The article he cites is one of our earlier joint works (Engler and Gardiner 2010). Others include Engler and Gardiner 2013, 2017; Gardiner and Engler 2010, 2012, 2016a.

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For Seiwert, “empty theory” is characterized by “the conflation of the transitive and intransitive aspects of knowledge, or, to put it differently, the confusion between the *subjects of theoretical discourses* and the *objects of empirical research*” (Seiwert 2020, 225; emphasis added). The terms ‘transitive’ and ‘intransitive’ come from Roy Bhaskar’s Critical Realism (CR) (Bhaskar 1978, 1979). They are intended to mark a division between two aspects of knowledge production: those tied to human activities, choices, categorizations, etc. (i.e. the ‘transitive dimension’, which corresponds more or less to the older vocabulary of ‘subjective’ and/or ‘relative’); and those that are ‘real’ or ontologically robust (i.e. the ‘intransitive dimension’, which corresponds more or less to the ‘objective’ of the older vocabulary). Bhaskar’s base distinction is represented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Intransitive and Transitive Dimensions of Research**

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<tr>
<th>Intransitive Dimension</th>
<th>Transitive Dimension</th>
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<td>Real objects, properties, and events that are objectively ‘out there, in the world’. These are independent of the practices of the transitive dimension.</td>
<td>Aspects that come about during the human production of knowledge; e.g. selection of data, categorization, theory (=product of theorizing). These are dependent on human activity, especially cognitive, conceptual, or theoretical activity.</td>
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Knowledge production leans heavily on conceptualization and linguistic description, and so Bhaskar grants language use a particularly important role in the transitive dimension. To escape linguistic relativism, CR holds that the language and concepts utilized in the transitive dimension are *about* extra-linguistic objects, properties, and events that inhabit the intransitive dimension. In other words, the *subject matter* of the transitive dimension of knowledge production is the real *objects* of the intransitive dimension.

Seiwert introduces some additional elements, dividing the transitive dimension into three sub-categories, and providing examples of items in the intransitive dimension that are typically of interest to scholars and historians of religion as illustrated in Table 2.
According to Seiwert, the first stage in theory-building is to select data. Seiwert notes our view that the only way for a scholar to do so is on the basis of some sort of pre-conception of their subject matter (Engler and Gardiner 2010, 287; Seiwert 2020, 226). He argues that this leads to “empty theory”. In particular, he argues that, on our view, (i) the pre-conception of the subject matter comes from theory, which is in the transitive dimension, so (ii) if that pre-conception delimits which objects are eligible for study, then (iii) the objects of study will forever be stuck in the transitive dimension as well. If his criticism is correct, then we will have failed to assure that the study of religion meets Stausberg’s specificity requirement for a theory of religion (Seiwert 2020, 224; Stausberg 2009, 4; Stausberg and Engler 2016, 56–65). In addition, we will have rendered all theories of religion “empty”: i.e. they will never be about (or explain) “aspects of external reality” but only “explain and illustrate the meanings of concepts” (Seiwert 2020, 225).

In Seiwert’s diagnosis, we take the ‘subject matter’ of SoR to be religion, and the ‘objects of study’ to be religious phenomena. This reading would make sense under a certain view of the nature of meaning (a representational semantic framework); but the core position in all our joint work is a very different view of meaning (an interpretationist one—see (Gardiner and Engler 2016b) for an overview of these semantic positions). Under an interpretationist semantics, a term like ‘religion’ does not get its meaning in terms of a relation between it and what it is supposed to be about, but rather in terms of the constellation of ways in which its use is to be understood. The only way to avoid equivocation is for all users of a term to conceive of it in similar ways, ways that can be described in terms of a proximity of other concepts in a ‘web of significance’. (Those ways don’t have to be the same in every case, but they must be ‘near enough’ in order to make sense that the speakers are talking about roughly the same thing or sorts of things.) In selecting their data, a scholar who self-describes their theoretical subject matter as religion will be constrained in all kinds of important ways. They can, for example, select a monastery, or a ritual, or a sacred text, because those are just the
sorts of things whose conceptions/descriptions lie close to that of ‘religion’ in the semantic webs. They cannot, on the other hand, choose hydrogen atoms, the 138th running of the Kentucky Derby, or Bob’s Big Book of Jokes—at least not without substantial background contextualizing, making a case that these things can be understood as lying sufficiently close to ‘religion’ in the semantic web. There will not be total agreement over what counts as religion/s, but there will be significant agreement over what doesn’t count.

We go further, and regard ‘religion’ as what philosophers and Clifford Geertz would call a “thin” taxon—i.e. its criteria for application are excessively broad: we urge scholars to select “thicker” ones and to be very upfront about their selections (Engler and Gardiner 2013). Many scholars lately, for example, have explicitly selected purported reference to culturally-posed supernatural agents as their working taxon, freely admitting that it does not cover everything that has gone under the umbrella ‘religion’ (e.g. Boyer 2001; Frankenberry 2014; Jensen 2014; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Schilbrack 2014). One advantage of this interpretivist approach is that such scholars do not have to reject the work of others who use different criteria for selecting their objects of study, at least not unless they cross over what is considered reasonable boundary zones in the web. (Debates about the relative size of the web are not necessarily ‘empty’; we think debate over the ‘Micky Mouse problem’ or the very idea of secular religions can be quite fruitful in homing in on acceptable understandings of the concept, but not in terms of the question of whether this, that, or the other thing really is religious.)

In employing an interpretivist understanding of the label for the theoretical subject matter, religion, the scholar can select exactly the sorts of things that Seiwert thinks as appropriate objects of study: monasteries, rituals, texts, etc. However, where Seiwert places these things in the intransitive dimension, we regard them in the transitive one—at least we would if we were inclined to use the transitive/intransitive vocabulary (which we aren’t). When we say that the scholar should select religious phenomena as their basic objects of study, we mean that they should select those things that members of the religious community targeted for study think of in terms of the concept of ‘religion’ that the scholar has preselected in the initial theory stage. Perhaps the hardest thing for a scholar of religion to do is to figure out just what those things are, and this involves trying to make sense of the words and actions of the members of the community by ascribing to them various propositional attitudes—beliefs, desires, hopes, commitments, etc. In fact, at base, we take these propositional attitudes, especially as they coalesce around the idea of intentional behaviour and its products (like artifacts, social practices and institutions, etc.) as the primary objects of interpretation and explanation for the scholar of religion. To get at them, though, the scholar has to pay attention to the material contexts in which they occur, and that will
certainly include such things as monasteries, rituals, and texts—that is, at least as described by the scholar. To this extent, we think we have accommodated Stausberg’s requirement of specifying one’s subject matter and in such a way as to avoid ‘empty’ theory in Seiwert’s sense.

Seiwert is quite right to conclude that what we suggest “cannot lead to a theory that explains religion as an extra-linguistic entity that can be identified by empirical research” (Seiwert 2020, 227), but mainly because we never intended that theory should do any such thing nor do we think that that is the sort of thing that religion can be—we don’t think it is any sort of thing, though there are lots of things that can be identified by empirical research that lie at the core of what the scholar is interested in understanding and explaining. ‘Religion’ is not an important concept for helping us figure out what the intransitive world is like. It is important for helping us make sense of how many people and groups conceive of themselves and their surroundings as they navigate through the world.

Beyond that, Seiwert thinks that much of what we argue can be salvaged as long as we “change the explanandum”, namely from “the category of religion” to “the data” (Seiwert 2020, 227). As described above, such an explanandum was always our intent, except that we don’t conceive of “data” in Seiwert’s sense, and the difference is important. He says this: “The data are descriptions providing information about intransitive objects of the external reality, and it is the external world that explanations in empirical disciplines aim at” (Seiwert 2020, 227). In a sense, we agree that data are descriptions, and that they are even about theory-independent objects in some sense, but we reject as problem-ridden the idea that intransitive reality is what descriptions and explanations aim at, whether in empirical disciplines or any others. The problem is that the very idea of an intransitive object—one uncontaminated by theory—is so thin as to preclude it doing much, if any, analytical work. So, it is not something that scholars need worry themselves too much over (at least not within the human sciences). It is crucial to note that Seiwert’s examples of intransitive objects of the empirical study of religion, from the general (e.g. monastery, ritual) to the specific (e.g. Chinese Buddhist monasteries, grand state rituals in early modern China), are identified by description. Seiwert cannot provide an example of an intransitive object of the study of religion—no one can. The best that one can do is to draw our attention to some goings-on ‘out there, in the world’, through a categorizing description. To say that those descriptions are nonetheless about intransitive objects is to invite the question of which objects they are, and that question can only be answered by more description. Pointing wouldn’t help; it doesn’t discriminate between buildings and monasteries, or between repetitive behaviour and ritual. The aim of the study of religion, says Seiwert, is to explain monasteries and ritual, not buildings and repetitive behaviour.
Seiwert draws a distinction between data/description and their interpretations (Seiwert 2020, 222) which suggests a line of response: while he accepts Stausberg and Engler’s claim that data, as description, rests on a community’s linguistic resources and so, in a general sense, is “already theory-laden” (Seiwert 2020, 222), he suggests that they may be theory-neutral relative to the kind of higher-level interpretation theories provide—i.e. those that lie above data/description category in Table 2. In other words, he hints at a distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘theoretical’ uses of language; e.g., that even if a person must use the description ‘monastery’ to point to what they take to be the real intransitive object behind the word, that description need not depend upon a ‘theory of religion’ of the sort supposed by Stausberg or us. We agree to a point: the lay person can talk about monasteries without taking courses in the study of religion/s; but even still they are deploying a classificatory concept of precisely the same functional type that Seiwert thinks theory does for sorting data, albeit of a rudimentary complexity. There is a semantic difference between a monastery and a building, even if there is no physical difference between them. One’s ordinary and everyday language serves to model one’s internalized theory of the world at its most generalized level. We can exist in the world without a language, but we cannot think about or act in the world without one.

Once this basic truism is accepted, an interpretationist supplementation will allow us to talk meaningfully about all sorts of things without worrying whether there is something ‘out there, in the world’, that directly corresponds to our words. The ‘aboutness’ of a subject matter will take on very different form than the representationalist idea of correspondence to extra-linguistic bits of reality, and one that obviates the need for intransitive realities.

The remaining point of contention between Seiwert and us is whether the study/history of religion can, in our view, properly be said to be an empirical discipline. We think so, but Seiwert might not. Part of the problem is that we seem to have very different guiding meta-theories about what makes a theory empirical; we adopt one from the philosophical semantics most closely associated with Donald Davidson (Davidson 1984) while Seiwert adopts one from the philosophy of science most closely associated with Roy Bhaskar—and while there are important affinities between them, Bhaskar’s vocabulary of ‘realism’ does tend to invoke the kind of representational semantic framework that Davidson and we find problematic. The main hallmarks of that framework are that the meaning of terms is given by their relation to purported extra-linguistic states-of-affairs (intransitive objects, properties, and events) and that truth is a relation of correspondence between sentences and those states-of-affairs that exist. It is through that lens that Seiwert’s characterization of empirical studies is to be read; as he lists (213), an academic study is empirical if and only if:
it aims “to produce true knowledge of the world”;

such knowledge “refers” to objectively real things in two senses: (i) they are not fictions made up by theorists, and (ii) they are the denizens of an intransitive reality that “is independent of the researchers who attempt to gain knowledge about it”;

the knowledge it produces is “fallible”; it can be true or false (where truth is correspondence to fact)\(^2\);

the method used to produce it can be “well- or ill-founded;” i.e. it can be “assessed, doubted, and critiqued with empirical and logical arguments”.

Implicit in other sections is the idea that empirical methodology is tied to observation in a fairly direct sense (which we agree with) and that observation is theory-neutral (which we challenge). In several places he introduces ‘observation’ as a third term beside ‘description’ and ‘theory,’ with the implication that just as theory is about data/descriptions, descriptions are of what we observe (Seiwert 2020, 229–230). He makes a strong point that often new directions in theorizing are spurred on by “unexpected observations”, suggesting that observations are more passive than descriptions, though when he expands upon that point, he talks exclusively in terms of historical descriptions that were not fully appreciated before (Seiwert 2020, 230).

To make a long story short, interpretationism entails that observations are, just as much as descriptions at any level, theory-laden: there are no seeings, only seeings-as (or reports of seeings under a description). This does not deny that there are things to be seen, or things that are to be described, only that once the main tenants of interpretationism are accepted, it is only the descriptions of objects (or properties or events) that can do any work in knowledge production. Interpretationism allows the study of religion, or any human science, to be empirical in each of the senses Seiwert mentions (save that truth is correspondence to intransitive reality). It even agrees that there are intransitive realities, it just finds no substantial work for them to do in an empirical study.

Our limited goal here has been to show a tension between two meta-theories: interpretationism (from philosophical semantics) and critical realism (from philo-

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\(^2\) Seiwert never explicitly says that truth is correspondence to fact; what he does say is that “the criteria for supporting truth claims are defined and agreed upon in a discursive community” (Seiwert 2020, 213), and that this makes the ascertainment of truth difficult. However, it is difficult to see how the possibility of falsity can be indicative of the empirical under a CR meta-theory unless you take correspondence to intransitive fact to be the lynchpin, or that the only way to avoid relativism is to meta-judge the criteria selected by the discursive community on the basis of whether they latch onto the intransitive realities.
sophy of science). If Seiwert were to insist that only CR can provide the proper categorizing concepts for delineating empirical and non-empirical studies, then his diagnosis and critique of both ‘empty’ and ‘blind’ theories would be dangerously close to question-begging; criticizing a position for not having the same commitments as one’s self does not go very far without including compelling reason why those commitments should be adopted. We have argued that intransitive realities find a natural home within an implicit semantic meta-theory that we find problematic for independent reasons, and that interpretationism can accommodate the study of religion as empirical. On the other hand, we find much affinity between CR and interpretationism on other grounds, and hopefully this marks the beginning of a fruitful and mutually beneficial exchange.3

Bibliography

Engler, Steven, and Mark Q. Gardiner. 2013. “‘God(s)’ As a Comparative Concept.” Din; Tidsskrift for Religion Og Kultur 2/1:120–132.

3 That exchange began well before now. We have been e-conversing with Hubert for some time since the publication of his article, and that exchange has brought us to a much better mutual understanding of the issues and our convergences and divergences. We hope to see others join the conversation, and thank Hubert for recommending the editors to invite us to contribute to this special issue.


