The Matter of Meaning and the Meaning of Matter: Explorations for the Material and Discursive Study of Religion

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Recent critical theory has seen increasing attention paid to questions of matter and materiality as that which is more than a constitutive medium for the determinations of society, culture, and language, as that which exceeds socio-cultural discourse, and as that which has agency in the materialization of reality. As a result of these explorations, variously labeled ‘new materialist’, there has been a serious reconsideration of what counts as the ‘matter’ for materialist thought today and an attendant attempt to overcome the classical oppositions of matter and discourse, materialism and idealism. In a renewed (re)turn to ontological and epistemological questions surrounding these issues, the neglect of the materiality of matter in social constructionist scholarship, particularly that which engages the analysis of discursive representations in the constitution of reality, is critiqued. Instead, it is argued that there are significant ways in which matter as well as discourse matters to the processes of material and discursive materializations.

This chapter postulates such an argument in its examination of recent discourse-analytical approaches in the study of religion. Through an engagement with the current uptake of discourse analysis (critical or otherwise) as a methodology or research program in religious studies scholarship, I will demonstrate that these religio-discursive analyses constitute discursive practices as a productive socio-cultural field at the expense of the very matter of bodies, both human and nonhuman. I argue that various scholars of the discursive study of religion often produce a material and discursive understanding of discourse, but not of materiality. Therefore, in seeking to understand the precise causal nature of discursive and material religious practices that take account of the mutual constitution and imbrication of discourse and materiality, in light of recent critical theory that considers the material world as more than discursively constructed and apprehended, this chapter analyzes the work of Karen Barad and the wider new materialism as linked with the study of religion and its renewed concern—in some quarters—with material culture and
the agential qualities of matter. This analysis will accordingly present the study
of religion with an alternative, yet more rigorous and integrated theoretical
approach for thinking through the relations and forms of discursive and mate-
rial imagination and materialization that constitute peoples' relations to cer-
tain practices and experiences that come to be lived as 'religious'. This chapter
thus aims to interrogate not only what a material and discursive study of reli-
gion might look like, but a material-discursive one at that.

Matters of Discourse

In his recent The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive
Change, 1800–2000 (2014), Kocku von Stuckrad scrutinizes the historical “con-
struction” of (the study of) religion and science, of “the various meanings that
are attributed to religion and science in cultural communication and practice”
(viii). Specifically, von Stuckrad is concerned with a meta-analysis of the lin-
guistic and cultural production of knowledge about religion, or the discourse
(and discourses) of religion (see also von Stuckrad 2010; 2013). For von Stuckrad,
and for various other scholars of religion who have employed discursive analys-
es in their work (many of whom are contributors to this volume),¹ to write
about a discursive study of religion is to understand that ‘religion’ is “an empty
signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially and culturally constructed
and negotiated in various situations. These constructions are ‘real’ [...] in the
sense of producing effects on human lives and societies” (Taira 2013: 26). In its
practical application, a discursive analysis of religion often examines ‘religion’
as the connections between individual believers and practitioners, their iden-
tifications (if any) with their religions or religious institutions, and the socio-
cultural contexts in which these religious expressions and institutions operate
(Wijsen 2013c: 72; see also Fairclough 1992; Wijsen 2013a).

But for a discursive analysis of religion, what exactly is ‘discourse’? Although
there are many divergent definitions of ‘discourse’, as there are many divergent
definitions of ‘religion’, in its most general usage it refers to any form of “lan-
guage in use” or “naturally occurring,” spoken language (Baker and Ellece 2011: 30).
Michel Foucault, the main theorist of discourse who von Stuckrad employs in
his discursive analysis of religion (2014: 10), defines discourse as ‘practices

¹ See “Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies,” a special issue of Religion (43[1]: 2013), edited by
Frans Wijsen, for one of the more recent and important collections of work applying discur-
sive analyses to the study of religion. A number of the contributors to this special issue of
Religion have also written chapters in the present volume.