



Discursive Study of Religion: Reviewing the State of the Art in Finland

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Hjelm, Titus (ed.): *Uskonto, kieli ja yhteiskunta: Johdatus diskursiiviseen uskon-
nontutkimukseen*. Tietolipas 270. Helsinki: SKS, 2021, 256 pp.

Moberg, Marcus: *Religion, Discourse, and Society: Towards a Discursive Sociol-
ogy of Religion*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2021, 248 pp.

Taira, Teemu: *Taking "Religion" Seriously: Essays on the Discursive Study of
Religion*. Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 18.
Leiden: Brill, 2022, 215 pp.

Introduction

The years 2021 and 2022 saw the publication of three books on the discursive study of religion (DSR), all written by Finnish scholars. Hjelm (2021a) is an edited volume, with an introduction, four theoretical chapters (including ones from Moberg and Taira), and five case studies, written in Finnish. Taira (2022) is a monograph that summarizes the writer's work on the discursive study of religion, including five case studies. Moberg's book (2021) is a monograph that discusses central thematic areas of the sociological theory of religion from the perspective of the discursive study of religion, and like Taira's, it can be read as a summary of the writer's earlier discursive study of religion work. Reading these books affords an overview of the state of the art in the discursive study of religion in Finland. Although DSR is by no means limited to Finland, Finnish scholars have contributed to the development of this research area, and the above authors are among the top names in the DSR internationally.

I read these three books as a researcher who is a potential user of the concepts and tools presented in the books, and as a university teacher, who teaches methods and methodologies in the study of religion and cultures. I

start by describing the books' key arguments and purposes. I then ask what the discursive study of religion is as presented in the books. I continue by examining variations in the presented approaches. Finally, I examine some practical issues in undertaking the discursive study of religion.

Taira's central argument is that researchers should take 'religion' seriously. The quotation marks refer to the discourse or category of religion. Instead of seeking 'better' new definitions of religion, researchers should refrain from definition and focus on studying how people classify things as religion. Such a study can be undertaken without a definition of religion, but it does not exclude the use of a heuristic definition. By talking about religion, people seek to gain various ends like legitimacy or tax exemptions. Although the use of 'religion' has certain interests, this does not mean that the users of the discourse are 'insincere' or making conscious calculations (Taira 2022, 123–124).

Moberg's mission is to subject influential 'theoretical perspectives in the sociology of religion' to a 'critical examination from a discursive point of view' that can correct these theories (Moberg 2021a, 4). He does this by discussing the concepts of secular and post-secular, religion's relationship with the individual and individualism, and religion in a market society. Furthermore, the book is structured by a three-level approach to DSR, in which research may be classified as ranging from 'purely *meta-theoretical* work, to work that contextualizes meta-theoretical reflection in relation to *theorizing within particular sub-fields in the study of religion*, to work that employs discourse analysis *as a method in empirical research*' (Moberg 2021a, 34).

Hjelm's book differs from the other two in that it is a collection of texts that take different approaches and thus includes a wider range of arguments. Hjelm's own approach is applied in one chapter of the book (Hjelm 2021c), in which he analyses how religious inequality and privilege are produced by the Finnish folk church discourse. Hjelm's approach is ideology-critical.

What is the discursive study of religion?

All the main authors would agree that the DSR is not merely the application of the method of discourse analysis to the study of religion. Instead, taking the concept of discourse seriously requires self-reflexivity in how the data are approached, as well as how theoretical concepts are employed. Additionally, as we shall see, the DSR framework may combine the use of various methods and types of data.

According to Hjelm the central aspects of discourse study are *constitutiveness* and *action orientation*. The former means that discourse not only describes but also construes reality, and the latter that various utterances are acts that seek to achieve something (Hjelm 2021a, 9–10). Taira approaches the essentials from the perspective of shared assumptions. The assumption that 1) language is crucial in constructing social reality, and 2) that its use has consequences, is basically the same as Hjelm's two aspects. Taira adds to the list 3) the assumption that there are multiple overlapping and competing sets of meaning (i.e. actual discourses) that 4) emerge historically, 'and that their [5]) affectivity is situational and contextual and that [6]) no language user is fully in control of the tool' (Taira 2022, 23). Building on Jean Carabine and Vivien Burr, Moberg (2021a, 15) defines discourse as follows:

Different discourses construct the social world in different ways, each providing 'shortcut paths' into particular notions about good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, normal and abnormal, etc. Discourses, however, are never static. Nor do they function in isolation from one another. Rather, they constantly mutate and cross-fertilize in various ways.

Discourses can lend support to or contest with each other, and they can construct the world in different ways. As discourse offers accounts of what is true, it is 'therefore also to be viewed as a central form of social action' (Moberg 2021a, 15). The reason behind Hjelm's more open definition, compared to those of Moberg and Taira, is probably the need to accommodate the diverse approaches presented in the book's chapters. Hjelm (2021, 12) continues his characterization of the DSR by referring to Tim Murphy (2000):

Following the definition of discourse, discursive study of religion studies how our talk about religion draws from the world, but especially how religion is actively construed in texts and speech.

Quoting Norman Fairclough, Moberg understands this as the dichotomy between 'world and word' in terms of *construal* and *construction*. Different versions of the world are construed as construals in discourse, but not all these constructions have similar constructive effects – that is, the capacity to become effective. According to Moberg this depends on the power and properties of whatever in the world is being constructed (Moberg 2021a, 12). It is important to bear this in mind to avoid the idealist trap of constructionism. Taira also touches on this issue when he writes about 'serious'

discourse, pointing out that it is important to take the context of language use into account (see also Konttori 2021). Discussing religion in a pub differs from ‘...a judge [stating] in a court that Judaism is a religion’ (Taira 2022, 129).

This is one of the reasons the DSR rarely builds on quantified data: it would be quite easy to count instances of a certain type of language use, but although the dispersion of a certain discourse may thus be uncovered, the numbers may tell us very little about the effect of this discourse, especially if we are unaware of the context of its appearance. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) especially is often done with small amounts of data, but corpus-assisted discourse analysis, for example, may take bigger datasets into account (Taira 2022, 25).

As previously mentioned, DSR scholars are interested in discourses *on* or *about* religion. Another way of approaching discourse and religion is to study *religious* discourse. For example, a researcher may be interested in how religious language is used to justify a certain type of politics. According to Taira this leads back to the question of the analytical definition of religion (Taira 2022, 40–41). To identify a discourse as religious requires a definition of what counts as religious. Within the critical study of religion Bruce Lincoln’s view has been that defining religion and studying religious discourse is the ‘way forward’, while Russell T. McCutcheon, William Arnal, and Timothy Fitzgerald, though sharing much with Lincoln’s approach, have proposed a deconstruction of the category of religion (Taira 2022, 39–41; see also Moberg 2021a, 24–26). The versions of the DSR represented by the three main authors are more compatible with the latter view.

Variations of DSR

In the three books many ways and many traditions of doing discursive study are presented, including the discourse-historical approach made famous by Ruth Wodak (Konttori 2021); sociopsychological approaches – including discursive psychology (Vesala & Pesonen 2021), and rhetorical approaches (Sakaranaho 2022). The main distinction, in relation to which the main authors of the books align themselves, is that between Norman Fairclough’s and Michel Foucault’s approaches, which are both concerned with power relations.

In the Finnish context the rhetorical study of religion, advocated especially by Tuula Sakaranaho, was a predecessor of the discursive study of religion. It shares with other discursive approaches the idea of constitutiveness, but the main difference with the Faircloughian or Foucauldian

approach, for example, is that it can be combined with the hermeneutic, explanatory, and critical interests of knowledge (Sakaranaho 2021, 104). The rhetorical study of religion can be undertaken even from an Eliadean perspective. According to Sakaranaho (2021, 108) the rhetorical approach is most suitable when studying assertion, influencing, and persuasion. These can be part of other discursive approaches, but the latter's interest is not limited to them. Sociopsychological approaches are concerned with various discursive repertoires that are employed in micro-level interactions. Konttori (2021, 147) situates the discourse-historical approach as part of critical discourse analysis, which usually refers to Faircloughian discourse analysis.

Perhaps the most clearly enunciated difference within the DSR is between the Foucauldian and Faircloughian approaches and the related question of whether the concept of ideology is necessary. Taira leans more closely to a Foucauldian approach but still picks the good parts from Fairclough. Hjelm and Moberg build mainly on Fairclough, but Moberg omits an explicitly normative stance, while for Hjelm the normative stance entails revealing the privileged status of certain religious groups.

But what is meant by 'ideology' in CDA? Moberg quotes Fairclough: 'interpretations and explanations can be said to be ideological if they can be shown to be ... necessary to establish and keep in place particular relations of power' (Moberg 2021a, 17). Hjelm writes about his views in his chapter about the Finnish folk church ideology. He builds on a critical understanding of ideology that is interested in 'meanings in service of power'. This ideology-critical reading seeks 'to analyse how discourses build a one-sided social reality, thus displacing alternative ways of understanding the world' (Hjelm 2021c, 230).

Meanwhile, Taira (2022, 35) rejects the use of the concept of ideology, following Foucault. Fairclough criticized Foucault for being relativist because the latter was interested in the 'truth effects' of discourse – but not the truth behind it. Taira points out that this is insensitive to Foucault, and Fairclough's insistence of 'truth beyond discourse' may fail to problematize the status of scientific knowledge that the discourse analyst produces. Taira also writes that he disagrees with the tendency to see instances of calling the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland a 'folk church' as ideological – here pointing to Hjelm – and hiding the fact that there is really a state church in Finland (Taira 2022, 35–36, n. 19). Taira points out that in the name of methodological coherence researchers should also focus on the claims that say that there is a state church in Finland. Taira's portrayal of the ideology-critical view as insistent that there is a scientifically knowable

truth beyond the discourse, however, seems a little simplistic: Hjelm's point of view seems to be that ideological discourse displaces or removes space from other possible discourses (Hjelm 2021c, 230), and not that the ELCF is 'really a state church'. Yet the question of whether there can be a non-ideological discourse remains.

The difference between Foucauldian and Faircloughian approaches also emerges when the meaning of 'critical' and the question of normativity are discussed. Moberg (2021a, 16) writes that

CDA denotes a particular type of normative discourse analytic research that is primarily concerned with revealing how particular discourses and types of discursive practice serve to underpin, perpetuate, and sustain various forms of social inequality, marginality, exclusion etc. with the expressed aim of seeking to mitigate or overcome these.

Normativity is thus related to the mission of revealing how ideology works, and for some adherents normativity is a prerequisite of being critical (Moberg 2021a, 16). However, Moberg writes that it is up to the individual researcher to decide 'what is critical enough' (Moberg 2021a, 17).

Being able to reveal the ideology of something requires the postulation of the non-ideological version of reality, which is somehow distorted by the ideological discourse. My lesson from this discussion is that if one is undertaking critical research, one should be at least self-critical of one's own presuppositions that one perhaps assumes are non-ideological. If a researcher takes a position outside the contested discussions within the researched field, it does not have to entail a claim to 'objectivity'; rather, it can be seen as a methodological positioning that allows the premises of these contestations to be revealed, which the contestants may even share.

Typologies and levels

The discursive study of religion operates on several levels. The Faircloughian approach is equated to textual- or linguistic-leaning analysis, while the Foucauldian approach is seen as historical-leaning. For example, while one of the pioneers of the DSR, Kocku von Stuckrad, has emphasized the importance of the latter and dismissed the former (Taira 2022, 35, see also n. 18), all the main writers of the three books employ at least some parts of the Faircloughian toolkit. Moberg, for example, argues that the historical Foucauldian approach favoured by von Stuckrad, which emphasizes

understanding the orders of discourse, is not enough; the analysis should also be done on the textual level, and the levels of approach should also be combined (Moberg 2021a, 46).

Following Fairclough, the levels of analysis can be named as those of text, discursive practices, and social practices (Taira 2022, 28; Moberg 2021a, 18). Textual analysis includes naming, predication, sentence construction, presuppositions, rhetorical tropes and narratives, and the important lexical analysis. Foucault, meanwhile, sees the three levels as intra-, inter-, and extra-discursive, which, however, are rarely separated in actual analyses (Taira 2022, 28–30).

Hjelm differentiates the metatheoretical and empirical levels of doing DSR (Hjelm 2021b, 12). The levels refer to the type of work, as well as the level of analysis:

In terms of levels of analysis, first-level analyses primarily engage with key categories and terms in the study of religion [...]. Second-level analyses inquire into the inherent presumptions and classificatory schemes of particular types of sub-field-specific theorizing [...]. Third-level analyses focus on actual instances of discourse and apply discourse analysis as a method [...] (Moberg 2021a, 35).

Moberg (2021a, 34) notes that these levels are interconnected and should be understood as heuristic. This, I think, can also be applied to other categorizations of levels of analysis: they help conceptualize one's own as well as other's studies, but in the studies cited in this article, for example, the analysis never seems to settle on one level.

Doing discursive study of religion

In addition to certain key concepts and distinctions of which the DSR researcher should be aware, I now present the more practical points that the books offer. As noted above, the concrete analyses can work on the textual level, as well as on more abstract levels of discourses or social practices. The writers in three books employ various types of data: for example, 'face-to-face interactions, different types of textual sources (e.g., official documents, media reports, legislation, political platforms), and different types of audiovisual data such as TV shows, web pages, and so on' (Moberg 2021a, 18). Moberg (2021a, 18) notes that there are no generally accepted rules for how the elements recurring in the data should be identified.

One clue for selecting relevant data may lie in how discourses are identified. According to Taira there are two main ways: focusing ‘on the discursive variety of the material [i.e. data-driven approach] or following one discourse that is recognizable from the material’. The discourses can be identified and named descriptively (‘e.g. classroom, newspaper discourse’) or interpretively (‘e.g. colonialist discourse, racist discourse’). According to Taira in a descriptive data-driven approach the starting point is in the multiplicity of discourses, and in an interpretative approach the focus is on hegemonic discourse and attached power relations (Taira 2022, 27).

Identifying power relations and hegemonic discourses is another important aspect. Rather than claiming that something is hegemonic because it is the most common type of expression, it is important to note what is effective, unchanging, or goes unquestioned (Taira 2022, 25; 32–33). Indeed, a wide circulation of a certain type of expression may even result from a contestation between different construals. This comes very close to Sakaranaho, and Alasuutari and Qadir, who write about the use of shared values or ‘God-terms’ when speaking to different audiences or arguing for something (Sakaranaho 2021, 69; Alasuutari & Qadir 2021, 73–74).

The analysed data may be from a homogenous source – for example, when analysing newspaper discourse – but tracking hegemonic discourses may need to use various types of data from different sources. For example, in his chapter Tuomas Äystö analyses documents produced in the preparation of the law on breach of the sanctity of religion, and a selected court case where the named law was applied (Äystö 2021, 200). In any case, the researcher should take various contexts – be they historical, political, sociological, and/or psychological – of the text into account. This also helps avoid possible biases in the texts (Konttori 2021, 149). Although some institutional locations of discourse production may be seen as more important than others in certain cases – for example, parliaments or courts versus popular culture or pubs – it is also important to take the circulation of certain discourses into account.

One important distinction is that between naturally occurring data (NOD) and data in which the researcher has been directly involved in their production. According to Taira the benefit of the former is that the researcher is not involved in the production of the discourse, which is the case when conducting interviews, observations, or questionnaires (Taira 2022, 25). Moberg notes that from the discursive perspective interviews are understood ‘as particular types of interactional contexts’. Instead of reflecting some inner states of the interviewees, they should be seen as actualizations of discourse use (Moberg 2021a, 58; see also Taira 2022, 24).

While Taira mostly analyses public and naturally occurring data, Moberg also employs interviews and Q methodology. The latter has been developed within social psychology and adapted to the study of religion in the form of the 'Faith Q-Sort'. The methodology builds on a selection of statements presented to research subjects in the form of cards (a Q-set), in relation to which the research subjects position themselves by selecting and ranking cards that contain statements with which they identify most and least. The actual sorting of the cards is analysed through factorial analysis (Moberg 2021a 139–141). Moberg (2021 a, 141) writes that

The methodology could [...] be employed to investigate how different categories of people position themselves vis-à-vis a wider range of prevalent 'religion-related' discourses, including those associated with an increasing 'individualization' of religion, such as, for example, discourses on 'spirituality,' 'spiritual, but not religious,' 'holistic wellbeing,' and 'personal choice in religious matters'.

This understanding of the role of Q methodology indicates that the DSR or DSR-informed sociology of religion is by no means methodically limited to conducting textual analysis of naturally occurring data. Using even quantitative methods may be justified when studying how people relate to a certain type of discourse, for example. However, this requires an understanding of the researcher's participation in the (re)production of a certain discourse.

Regarding the type of data, even multimodal data such as pictures, music, television shows, or comic books can be analysed within the DSR. However, the emphasis is on language, which 'remains by far the most significant semiotic form' (Moberg 2021a, 19). The DSR may therefore not be the first choice for a researcher who wishes to study such things as 'materiality' or 'visuality' on their own terms, and the books discussed here offer little help for conducting a multimodal discursive study. However, the books show that the DSR is flexible regarding methods and data. The adaptation depends on the researcher.

Conclusion

Above I have raised some issues from the current state of the art within the DSR in Finland. The three books analysed share various purposes, and a thorough reading of each would require more space. For example, the books include discussions of a researcher's public role (Taira 2022), the categories

of 'post-secular', 'individualism', 'marketization', or 'spirituality' and issues in studying official discourse (Moberg 2021a), versions of 'spirituality' in discussions of parishes' role in rural politics (Vesala & Pesonen 2021), Nicolas Sarkozy's views on Islam (Konttori 2021), and priestly discourse in WWII Finland (Tilli 2021), which this review has not discussed.

Hjelm's edited volume works as an entry-level text for the Finnish reader, and it also gives a more diverse picture of what the discursive study of religion can be than one would get from reading only Hjelm's, Moberg's, or Taira's own writings. Taira's and Moberg's monographs are suitable for more advanced readers who are somewhat familiar with the DSR, critical religion, and/or sociological theories about religion. Moberg's monograph can be especially recommended to those interested in theorizing religion. All three include various useful examples for those who are interested in building their own approach within the discursive study of religion.

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